

MACABRE CADAVER

A Magazine of Speculative Fiction, Art and Poetry



Issue 3, October 2008

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FICTION:

Philip Roberts

Jamie Eyberg

Aaron A. Polson

Jessica Lynne Gardner

Lawrence R. Dagstine

Noah Elliot Blake

Alex Moisi

Amanda Lawrence Auverigne

Ricardo Delgado

Abigail Lambton

POETRY:

Keaton Foster

Richard H. Fay

Emmanuel Paige

ART:

Richard H. Fay

Ricardo Delgado

RESSURECTION MARY:

A FADING LEGEND

Jeff Woodward

STAR ST. GERMAIN INTERVIEW

Jeff Woodward

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A MESSAGE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to Issue 3, October 2008 of Macabre Cadaver, a monthly online magazine that publishes speculative fiction, art, and poetry. We are excited to bring this issue to you because this month brings Halloween and we have some good stories that are proper and fitting for such a wonderful holiday.

This issue has brought to light the topic of reprints. Some of the stories and images in this issue have seen print elsewhere, and in our guidelines I have stated that I do not accept reprints. I have made exceptions, however, I prefer to publish only non-derivative and unpublished works, primarily to avoid conflict and court proceedings, and it is also nice to be the first one to have a crack at a fresh and new story or artwork. If something is so profound that it must be published again and it isn't bound by copyright and contractual restrictions, I will consider republishing it upon special circumstances, such as: it helps destroy evil alien invaders from outer space or averts World War III. This is the exception, not the rule. Please do not submit stories if they have been published before, anywhere, in a blog, forum, homepage, webzine, or other print media. If you feel you must, please inform me that it has been previously published so I can take necessary measures to avoid becoming the butt of some vindictive blogger's cruel witticisms and, more importantly, prosecution. Thank you. Enjoy.

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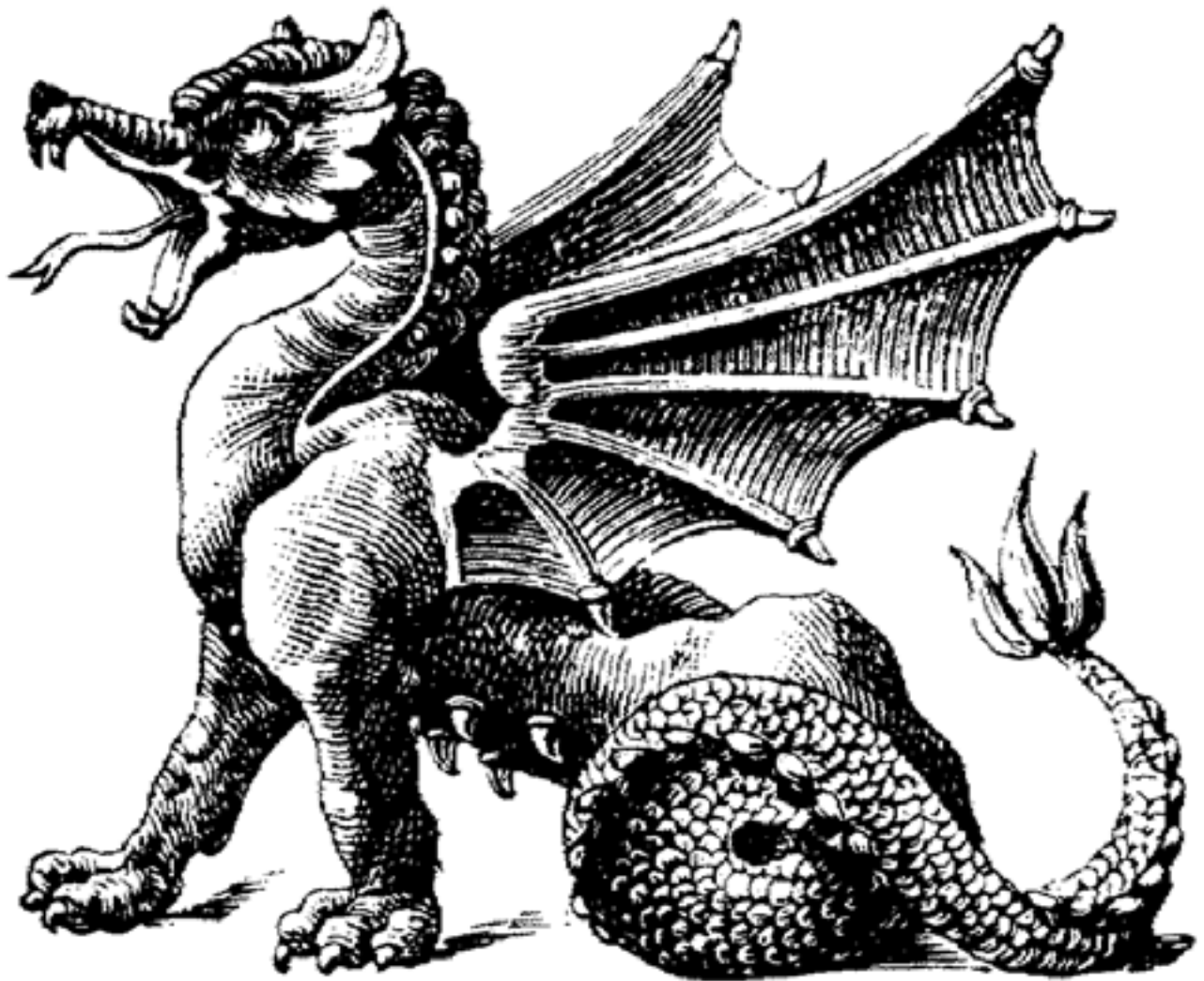
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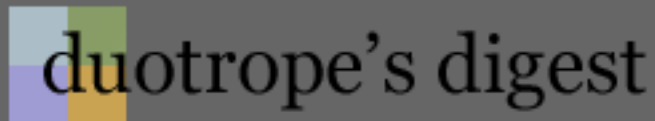
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Happy Halloween



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LOST IN THE SUBURBS

by Philip Roberts

THE PARTY WAS LOCATED at 402 Harper, and Derrick hadn't the slightest idea where that was. He'd been driving around for a full hour without much hope anymore of finding the party. All he wanted was to go home; unfortunately, he didn't know how to get himself out of the maze he'd foolishly entered.

The day was October 31st, and the party for Halloween. During his entire trek through the suburban hell he found himself in, he watched children as they trick or treated. Daylight had still lingered in the sky when he had set out, but now the world darkened around him as the night marched on and clouds rolled in.

His sight diminished by the gloom, Derrick stopped at an intersection to make out the street name. He sat at the corner of Franklin and Greggers, two streets he didn't know a thing about.

He turned left onto Franklin because he didn't think he'd gone down Franklin yet, and continued on.

Asking someone for directions was always an option, but Derrick didn't feel like knocking on a stranger's door. Other people managed to find their way out of this place without directions.

As much as he'd grown to despise the neighborhood in the past hour, he had to give them credit for their dedication to the holiday. Almost every house was well decorated. Cobwebs hung from trees and skeletons coated doors. Not a single house was lacking in decorations.

Another stop sign, and on this one he paused, trying as hard as he could to retrace his course. Aimlessly driving around obviously wasn't working.

Light caught his eye, pouring from beneath a closing garage door. What he saw inside the garage he couldn't digest. His mind took in the image, but didn't really take it in until after the garage door had fully closed.

There had been two people in the garage. One he saw only the bottom half of, jeans and boots covering him. The other guy had been hanging upside down, hands draped limply on the ground. A bucket was under his head, and if what Derrick saw was accurate, it almost looked like blood had been pouring down the guy's head into the bucket, like a deer hung up by its feet, the blood drained from the body.

But no, that hadn't been what he saw. After all, this was Halloween, and people put up all sorts of decorations. All he'd seen was some kind of Halloween display.

That's all it had been.

Through a window on the side of the garage he could swear he saw a man's face, watching him, but no, that was probably just in his head as well. Derrick laughed at his own paranoia, and drove straight, thoughts of plotting out his path momentarily forgotten.

The night grew darker, and in the distance lightning flickered. He saw fewer and fewer children the farther he drove. He turned right, then left, then right again.

Before, the streets had just kept coming around. He had been driving in circles around the exact same neighborhood, coming at it from a different direction every time, but now the street names were different. He was still in the suburbs, but apparently in another section of it. Hopefully the exit over here would be easier to find.

Sure enough, the rain began. Luckily it wasn't pouring, but still, it made reading the street names even harder. It also made seeing the children harder, a fact Derrick took to heart when one walked out into the street.

Fortunately, the road wasn't slick just yet, and Derrick managed to bring his car to a skidding halt before striking the child, who looked no more than seven or eight. His hands tightly gripped the wheel, more amazed by the kid's lack of reaction than the near collision. Little bastard didn't even look over at Derrick and just kept on walking.

In the light of his headlights Derrick got a good look at the kid. He wore a black Dracula cape and wore what appeared to be gloves on his hands, but the gloves were apparently designed to look like human hands. From Derrick's perspective, it looked like the kid had the skin from another person's hands covering his own. All of this was complimented by blood around the boy's lips and dripping down his chin in the falling rain.

Apparently things had changed greatly in the short span of time since Derrick was a child. No way would a mother let her child dress in such a horrific outfit, especially what looked like blood on the boy's arms from within the skin gloves.

Only after the boy had crossed the street did Derrick realize it wasn't a big candy bag gripped in his left hand, but what had to be a dead dog.

Derrick wanted to go home, and he wanted to right now.

His tires spun on the slick ground for a second before propelling him forward. He ran two stop signs before he finally got himself back under control. His speed slowed to the appropriate twenty-five, and he continued on.

If the last houses he had passed had been good at decorating for Halloween, the houses he drove by now were outstanding. Not only did cobwebs cover the trees, but stretched towards the houses, and in the glare of the lighting he could swear he saw spiders crawling on them.

The look of the houses themselves helped compliment this, much older. These weren't the cookie cutter homes he'd grown used to, but old and unique. Most looked to be deteriorating, shingles missing from the roofs, paint peeling and chipped. The lights on in windows revealed dark smudges of dirt and grime.

Up ahead of him a girl hung from a noose, latched onto a tree in the front yard. He slowed his car to stare at the hanging body. Her dead face was youthful, only a teenager, but long wet brown hair obscured most of her face from Derrick's view. She wore a t-shirt and jeans, bare feet swaying lightly above damp grass.

Then Derrick was driving past her and he looked in his rearview mirror at the amazing decoration. She was only the first of the displays to come.

On the next house a body had been nailed to the front door. The man's hands were fastened to the upper door-frame and he hung limply forward, head resting on his shirtless chest. Derrick marveled at how real the man looked. Blood ran down his arms from the metal drilled into his hands. Real jeans and shoes covered his lower half.

Next came the most realistic looking of them all: a middle-aged man impaled on a massive stake in a front yard, and Derrick found his stomach tightening into a deeper knot.

Someone had shoved a seven-foot tall stake in the ground and impaled it through the overweight man's back. He hung suspended three feet in the air, his body limp, head hanging back, face aimed towards Derrick's car. The base of the stake was soaked red, and in the bursts of lightening Derrick could see the man's guts shoved up through his stomach on the tip of the spiked pole.

Derrick stopped his car to stare, transfixed by the gory image, his mind swirling as it attempted to rationalize everything he was seeing.

The man's eyes opened with a jerk; mouth opening wide as he screamed into the night. His hands reached up and touched his own intestines wrapped around the stake. He struggled, which only dug the spike deeper through him, and after two minutes, his struggles ceased and he hung limp once more.

This was not a decoration. A soft moan ran through Derrick's body followed by the fiery taste of stomach acid in the back of his throat.

Only then did he see the children.

Both sides of the street were cluttered with them, candy bags in hand; each was dressed just as horribly as the child he had almost hit. Many had masks made of what looked like a person's face. Other's Derrick actually believed had mutilated their own faces to obtain such grotesque appearances. And maybe they had.

Derrick's foot struck the gas pedal, forced right away to slam on the brakes when he saw two children walk across the street in front of him.

Unlike the last child, these took notice of him, as did all the others. Every child turned towards his car; their faces slick with what he knew was both rainwater and blood.

They began to walk towards him, and through the pounding rain he heard them speak, each of them chanting, "Trick or Treat," over and over again.

Without thought Derrick locked his car door. A little girl approached, her hand stuffed into her bag of candy. She lifted up her prize, the skin from an old woman's face, and pressed it against Derrick's window.

His car rocked as a child climbed onto the trunk, then another climbed onto his hood. There were too many of them in front of his car for him to start driving. Through the terror the thought came: what if these really were children and everything around him was fake? What would he do when the police showed up at his door because he ran over school children in a panic?

An older boy, probably thirteen or so, pulled out a baseball bat. Derrick's passenger side window cracked from the impact, and Derrick couldn't stop himself from screaming. Around him the chorus of Trick or Treats grew louder, the children's faces distorted into gleeful grins of dark joy.

A teenager jumped on the hood of his car and shoved

aside the two kids who had been there, knocking both to the ground. He brought up the axe until it rose above his head. His face was painted red and in his eyes were contacts made to look like snake eyes; at least, Derrick hoped they were only contacts. The bat struck his passenger window again, made his eyes jump to the side, but only until the axe came down and lodged in his windshield.

The car lurched forward. He watched the teenager on the hood fall off and felt the bump of tires rolling over the fallen body of a child, but Derrick didn't care.

He didn't look in his rearview mirror as he shot through the night, his windshield and passenger side windows all but destroyed.

How, he wasn't sure, his trip through the night erratic and without destination, but somehow in his panic he found the exit, a stoplight up ahead.

The light was red, but Derrick didn't stop. A car screeched to a halt just in time to stop from smashing into the side of Derrick's, and he heard the driver honk, but only barely. After five minutes Derrick realized where he was, and fifteen minutes later, drove into the parking lot of his apartment building.

He stepped out of his car in a daze and slowly walked up to his door.

Once inside he didn't bother with the lights, but stood in the darkness, eyeing his living room. He didn't know what he was supposed to do or what had actually happened. His windows were shattered, proof of something, but Derrick didn't want to think about the rest. He didn't want to see the man's face turned towards him, impaled for nothing more than decoration.

All of it had been real.

Behind him he heard movement as someone walked up to the door, followed by a light knocking, and then a child's voice. "Trick or Treat."

Derrick couldn't stop screaming.



Bio: Philip lives in Overland Park, Kansas and holds a degree in Creative Writing with a minor in Film from the University of Kansas. As a beginner in the publishing world, he's a member of the Horror Writer's Association, and has had numerous short stories published in both print and online magazines, such as Twisted Dreams Magazine, Byzarium, and The Horror Library. More information on his works can be found at www.philipmroberts.com.

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GOLD LOTUSES

by Jessica Lynne Gardner

A WOMAN'S FOOT SHOULDN'T look like that. . . . She stared unapologetically as it wiggled back and forth, trying to stuff the calloused heel into the red stiletto. The calves weren't any better. Dimpled with cellulite, veins bulged like twisted roots under the pale skin. To make matters worse there were prickles of thick, long black hairs sticking up straight off of them like antenna. Suyin handed her a size ten wide, trying not to grimace as the desperately overweight and unkempt woman struggled to reach down and pry them off her feet. When the pump came off, the thing was in its gruesome glory. Yellowed, jagged nails embedded in wide rounded toes and cracks in the sole that would shame an African drought. She felt bile rise into her throat. She couldn't even be called a female. There was no beauty in her enormous form and putrid sweat. Yet Suyin could look past it all if only she had taken care of her feet, the symbol of femininity. Cleanliness is holiness after all.

She shifted uncomfortably as she looked down at her own small baby doll shoes. She gazed at them in silent judgment. They were a size six, tiny for American standards but not nearly as beautiful as Song's. Suyin's face twisted with grief at the thought. So close to perfection . . .

"Ma'am? Excuse me!" called the obese customer, her face flushed and beads of sweat forming over the whiskers of her top lip and under her double chin. "I need a larger size."

Suyin glanced at her, wanting to take the pointy heel and embed it into her forehead. "I'm sorry that's the largest this style comes in. Would you like to try another model?"

The woman cursed. "This store is discriminating! And you—you weren't helpful at all! I'm never shopping here again. And god help you if I see your supervisor." She tried to lift herself out of the chair and ended up falling back into the seat. Suyin's manager nodded to her. Giving a look of pure disdain she helped lift the irate customer up with many grunts and groans. Without another complaint the woman wobbled out of the store slowly, burning with embarrassment.

Suyin sighed and her manager gave her a pat on the

back. "Can you believe the nerve of that woman?" She looked at Suyin's tired face. "You ok?"

"Yes, thank you Kim. I'm just glad she's gone."

With a wink and reassuring smile she got back to counting down the register and left Suyin to clean up the piles of discarded shoes on the floor. She hated her job. At the end of the day the floors were desecrated in toe cheese, jagged toenail flakes and dustings of skin from the barefooted customers. She vacuumed for two hours every night before leaving.

It was late when she got home. The light of morning was a cold yellow underneath the purple clouds of night. The trailer was dark; the porch bulb must have finally burnt out under the aluminum awning. As she slipped off her work shoes, a brief touch of air against her soles made her shudder with contempt. She quickly felt around in the darkness for the old black leather loafers that she kept for walking around the house. Walking barefoot only served to toughen the skin and widen the foot.

She stood before the boudoir mirror and unwound her trail of wavy gray and mahogany streaked hair from the tight rubber band. Staring accusingly at her reflection she frowned at her aging skin. Her almond, lash less eyes were beginning to disappear into her long oval face. The lines to the side of her thin, puckered lips dragged down deeply toward her chin. She realized that she looked older than her forty-nine years. Older than Song. Her sister was beautiful to say the least. She had long, straight black hair, a round face with full lips and perfectly shaped gold lotuses. Ten years her senior, Song was the eldest and acquired all that went with her title including the family heirlooms, and marriage to a wealthy Chinese businessman.

But Suyin had never been an attractive girl. Her name itself meant "plain" when translated. It was if her mother had cursed her to be ugly, giving the good genetics, charm and love to her first born instead. If only she had been born sooner . . .

In the corner of the mirror she noticed the glint of gold shining in the very back of the closet. She put her fingers between the cracks of the sliding doors and pushed it

all the way open. A tiny, brocaded object sat on the top shelf, its beauty purposely hidden underneath a pile of hats and scarves. Stepping up on the dusty little wooden stool, she reached a short arm to the back of the shelf and grunted as she struggled to grasp it with the tips of her fore and middle fingers. After a few attempts, she withdrew her hand holding a tiny shoe. It was the size of a baby's foot, the gold silk was decorated in pink flowers woven lovingly by hand.

The toes were pointed slightly, making the whole shoe look like the graceful lotus petal. She remembered living in Beijing, watching in fascination as her sister wrapped her feet every day. She and her mother used to sow the three inch shoes for Song using the best fabrics. There were a dozen other pairs stored in a plastic bag under her bed but this one was special—it had belonged to her sister. It used to be on display in a dust-proof case mounted on her wall but slowly it had begun to unnerve her, torturing her with intangible memories of her home.

San Francisco was somewhat similar with its bustling Chinatown filled with both familiar antiques and cheap tourist baubles but she had been old enough to taste the true culture of her homeland before she moved there. She remembered the honor of her family even if they had forgotten her.

She brushed her teeth and tried to get some rest but sleep never came. She couldn't stop thinking about the disgusting woman that had walked in earlier, or rather the disgusting feet attached to the disgusting woman. When sleep eventually took her, she awoke from the rays burning behind her eyelids even before the clock sounded.

Unlocking the door to the shop she entered and quickly disarmed the security alarm. The store was stocked and clean but she knew that wouldn't last longer than an hour or two. As soon as she finished the morning register opening and unlocked the door, the first customer walked in.

By noon the store was full and her co-worker hadn't showed up. When she was helping an elderly woman with a bad back place a pair of sandals over her twisted toes, she stole a glance at the register. Five people waited impatiently in line. She squished the other shoe onto the lady's foot and rushed to the front. The first customer, a tall blonde wearing pearls and a polka-dot chiffon dress, gave her a dirty glance. "Aren't there other clerks in this store?"

She was saved by the ring of the phone which she tucked behind her ear as she entered in her number and

scanned the woman's shoe boxes.

"Hi is this Suying?"

"Suyin."

"Oh yeah, sorry. Um listen I can't make it in today," there was a fake sounding hack on the other end, "I have a nasty cold."

"Ok Natalie." She hung up on her and cursed in Chinese.

"What?" The customer demanded indignantly.

"Oh, I said these are on sale, you can grab another pair to get half off the total cost."

She thought for a second. "No that's ok; I don't want to have to wait in line again. I'm late as it is thanks to you."

She rang up customers for three hours straight. There was no lunch break that day either. At one in the afternoon, when she finally had some time to breathe, she called Kim who didn't pick up. She clenched her fists. She had forgotten that her manager had left for a three day vacation. Slamming the phone on the receiver, she opened the drawer and fished out some stale Ritz crackers that had been in there for a few months. Crunching on them blissfully, she had an hour of peace before the doorbell rang again. A large silhouette entered. Suyin's shoulders sagged in exhaustion. It was the lady from hell. She waddled to the back and began carelessly digging through the shelves, knocking boxes to the floor, casualties of her Godzilla wrath. She was in the size nine and a half section again and she rubbed her temples, foreseeing the verbal abuse she was about to receive.

She didn't greet the customer and she didn't care. There would be a future complaint but she was not going to stoop down to those feet again. The woman continued to drop boxes from their place, grunting and groaning with exertion and increasing impatience. Let her get angry, she thought. She'd rather clean up the mess when she left then to deal with her then. She tried not to smile as she heard a slap of the box struck the floor and the surprised yelp that followed.

"Excuse me? Ma'am!" The familiar melodramatic whine.

She took a deep breath. "Yes, can I help you?" she said through a forced smile.

The recognition passed over the woman's face slowly and she stuttered as she tried to speak, "Well, I—I"

"What size do you need Ma'am?"

"A nine and a half".

She couldn't believe the woman had enough gall . . .
"Sure thing. What type of shoe, pumps perhaps?"

"No I'm looking for a classy loafer this time."

Suyin nearly laughed. A loafer, yes, but definitely not classy . . .

"A pair like what I'm wearing?" She pointed at the pointed black leather loafers.

"Ugh no . . . those look terrible on your feet. I was a foot model in my day, I should know. I want something more rounded."

Suyin plucked a pair off the shelf in black and handed them to her, her nostrils flaring.

The woman examined them and shook her head. "No, not black. Maybe brown."

She placed them back on the shelf and bent to look at the bottom for a pair of brown loafers. The woman's self-satisfied glare bored into the back of her head. She was defeated once again. But then at the very corner between the nines and half sizes was the brown pair. A smug grin was on her face as she handed them to the astonished owner of the ugly feet. She snatched them from her and took them out of the box. Suyin became desperate.

"Anything else?"

"No."

She nearly sighed with relief and headed to the front of the store to clean up. She knew this bitch was going to be there for at least another hour and in that time the store would be a disaster. She'd actually had time to wipe down the cabinets and picked up the boxes from the men's and most of the children's section before the plea came again.

"Ma'am!"

She huffed and cut through the isles to the other side of the store. "Yes?"

The woman stood in the middle of a pile of boxes on the floor. "I need a size ten in these."

Trying not to lose her mind, she nodded and quickly found a pair. She was beginning to think of the woman as a demon sent to torment her. She was evil, pure undisputed evil. As she reached out to take the box Suyin could see huge wet circles bleeding through the orange cotton tee under her arms. The smell that wafted from them was even more sickening and resembled the scent of a glazed ham. She coughed and held the vomit in her throat. Walking to the bathroom she emptied the liquid from her gut and washed her face.

Shaking, she walked back out. The demon was yell-

ing for her again. She balled her fists tightly, digging her long nails into her palm. The stress made her neck pulse wildly.

"Yes?" Her voice had a slight edge that made the woman hesitate.

"I—uh, need ten and a half."

She took her time finding it, letting herself cool down. Who was this low-life to make her angry? She was in control. After she handed it to her she strode up front and began cutting price signs for the morning. At last, the demon came up front holding a pair of shoes. She closed her eyes briefly, relieved. Setting them up on the counter she dug through her purse. Suyin signed in and scanned the shoes.

"Oh, you've taken the wrong size. These are the nine and a half pair."

"Don't you think I know that? This is my size".

Suyin's eyes narrowed as she rung them up. Her teeth clenched. "That'll be thirty dollars and eighty-five cents."

"You know you should really take anger management . . ."

The heavy duty hole-puncher she'd been eyeing was suddenly in her hand and bashing the woman's skull. The demon flailed around, the fat shaking like overflowing bowls of ambrosia but far less appealing. It didn't take long to bring her down. Suyin was small but she was fast. She had done well in ballet when she was young and still did tai chi every morning. She hummed as she shoved the corpse onto the dolly cart left out front from the Home Depot across the parking lot. The street was quiet; stark lights from the hardware store gave off just enough light for her to find the keyhole but not enough to alert anyone who might have been watching.

Straining to tilt the dolly back, the body was slowly lifted and pointing upward, arched at the back. She managed to lift it high enough for the shoulders and neck to lie against the edge and partially inside the mouth of the trunk. Taking hold of her feet she got underneath her and pushed upward until she slid all the way in. Huffing from the strain, she shut threw the dolly inside and closed the trunk, quickly driving away.

Once home she opened the trunk and propped up the dolly. She grabbed the disgusting ankles and yanked the massive backend over the edge, grunting. The rest of her just slid down onto the dolly on the ground. She wheeled it into her house, taking a quick peek to make sure no

one was around. She stopped to slide on her house shoes. Wheeling the cart inside, she sat on the toilet seat, catching her breath. Not bad for a fifty year old lady.

She looked at the immobile body in the tub. The side of the forehead was blackened and swollen, some blood oozing out and running over the eyes and mouth. This was going to take awhile so she decided to start now.

Reaching under the kitchen sink, she pulled out a large green bucket and an empty medium sized container. The liquid contents of the bucket, now acrid with age, were poured into the container, the smell nearly making her gag. She closed the lid back over the container. It was very important to keep the air out. Tucking it back under the sink, she returned to the tub and placed it inside. The body propped against the back of the tub in an upright position, she bent the knees close to the body and removed the tennis shoes from the massive feet, submerging each foot into the brownish red solution.

Seated on her bed with her chin in her hand, she observed her handiwork. The process hadn't taken as long as she had remembered so she was done within a few hours. Even though it had been much easier using an immobile body, she wasn't satisfied. They didn't turn out the way she'd hoped. Of course how would they when you started with such a person?

She glance at her clock and decided to take an hour nap before heading back into work. The next day was better. With the hurricane warning being posted on all the radio stations and weather channels people were staying home, leaving the stores empty. She spent the day dusting the shelves and vacuuming the floors. The new girl must have quit after her phony call the other day and the manager was still out on leave.

At nine o'clock the doorbell rang. In walked a short young blonde slight of build and twirling her keys on her lanyard as she laughed shrilly on her cell.

"Hello. Can I help you find anything today?"

"Hold on a second," she said exasperated to the person on the other line. "No thanks" then turning, "Ok, I'm back. What did he say?"

After fifteen minutes of shopping she brought up a box of bright blue Pumas. She had been a little harder to take down, probably because of strained muscle in her back when lifting the corpse last night. The heavy hole punch was fast becoming an extension of her hand. It was a good thing the girl was thin because she had forgotten to put the dolly back into the trunk. She dragged her

to the tub between the cold, white legs of the first woman and laid her feet inside the liquid. The results had been better this time but she had still been too big, causing the shape to be too long. It was unnatural, she decided.

Three was definitely a charm. A petite, well-dressed woman in her early thirties walked in wearing a white sundress. Perfect, she thought, gazing at the tiny sandals. She brought her down fast but as she took her to the car, a teenage boy had noticed, pedaling away fast on his bike.

She threw her in the tub hastily and dipped her feet into the liquid. The bathroom had begun to exude an awful stench and to her pleasant surprise she heard a moan coming from her. She grabbed a rope and tied her hands behind her back tightly just as she came to. A bandage wrapped tightly around her mouth kept her silent as she began to massage her feet. With soft whispers she kneaded the soles of the foot, turning the complexion from white to pink. Just as she'd watched Ma do with Song many times. "Always start from the middle of the sole and rub outward" she used to say. The woman's hazel eyes wide with fear she let out the first muffled scream when the pinky toe was folded. Suyin shushed her gently and went on to massage the rest, working the blood into it, softening the skin of the tiny, narrow feet. The second smallest toe cracked and she screamed again, this time a little less loud as the tears rolled down her cheek. By the third toe she had gone silent but her chest grew heavy and labored as she sucked in each breath.

Taking hold of the toes she curled them tightly into the sole and began wrapping it, securing the toes by tying it around the heel. When she got to the other foot, she had already passed out. Suyin admired her strength. She'd made it through a week before the infection killed her. It was a shame; she'd been giving her water and bread to keep her alive. It didn't matter now. She finally had what she wanted. A perfect pair of three inch gold lotuses now filled the brocade shoes on her dresser. The delicate bandaged feet, severed from their host, were perfectly clubbed inside the shoes that had been meant for her own feet. She had brought honor back to her family—to her traditions. She would show them real beauty.

And it didn't matter that even now the police broke down the door and let out muffled curses as they discovered the bodies in the tub. She knew they wouldn't understand. But they can't take this accomplishment from her. Mother would be proud. A small smile started at the

corner of her mouth. Song hadn't been able to take the pain. After she moved away, her bandages weren't clean enough and she had been infected, the pus dripped from the beautiful feet. She remembered how they looked as she cleaned her body for burial. They hadn't known it was her but somehow mama did. That's when they sent her away. She wished there was a way to send the filled shoes to her, to show her that she wasn't a failure, that she knew how to do it now and her prodigies would never fade away, they were locked forever in glistening golden brocade. She looked at them one last time as she was handcuffed. This is how a woman's foot should look . . . a perfect three inch gold lotus.



Bio: A Journalist, Horror/ Fantasy writer, business writer and poet, Jessica Lynne Gardner has pursued the art of writing in many forms.

She has been published in over a dozen anthologies and magazines including Darkened Horizons, Twisted Tongue, Sinister Landscapes. She has made three sales: "Wishbone" and "The Mosquito Woman" are to appear in Phobia Magazine and "Onyx Noir" will be featured in the upcoming anthology Brutality As an Art by Snuff Books.

Her work will also appear in two upcoming collaborative projects: The Edward Ballister Project (www.myspace.com/edwardballister) and The Ladies of Horror 2008. She is a member of The Southern Horror Writer's Association (SHWA) and the International Order of Horror Professionals and studies at a local college to obtain a degree in literature while writing a fantasy novel and horror stories on the side. www.JessicaLynneGardner.webs.com.

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Star St. Germain Interview

by Jeff Woodward

Jeff Woodward: *We first saw your illustrations in Weird Tales. Your version of a Franz Kafka portrait was definitely creative. Where do you draw your inspiration from?*

Star: I draw most of my inspiration from my own life, friends, and relationships. I have a way of trying to articulate myself in metaphor, so often my drawings are more literal representations of those. For example, I was feeling anxious over what the outcome of something was going to be, and all I could do was wait to see how it played out. I thought of the old expression "don't hold your breath" & drew a self portrait with my lungs on the outside of my body.

JW: *You range in creativity from illustrations and comic books, to clothing design, photography and video production. Is there one median you prefer to the rest?*

Star: I have always worked in a number of different mediums, and I don't really prefer one to another.

Although. I will say that I generally tend to work digitally. I haven't really drawn on paper in years!

JW: *Being the daughter of a racecar driver, any memorable experiences growing up?(you know I had to throw that in, heh)*

Star: Yes. My father was always converting street cars to race cars, then back to street cars again. None of them had speedometers, and sometimes they still had the roll cage inside. I remember getting dropped off at school in these sorts of franken-cars. It was sort of exciting.

JW: *Are you a fan of the horror/fantasy genre?*

Star: Horror and fantasy is really hit or miss for me. I think the best horror (& fantasy too!) comes from real experiences, where the artist uses the genre as a method of exaggerating an event from their life to match



the way they felt when they experienced it. Most of the stuff I enjoy most is more psychological in nature, and I feel like the more gory-for-the-sake-of-gory works that have been coming out in triplicate as of late (i.e. Saw) aren't as much of my deal.

I also prefer books to movies. I think the last thing I read that really scared me in a way I loved was House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski, but most people probably wouldn't call that horror.

JW: *How long have you been playing the cello, and have you ever performed on stage?*

Star: I've been playing cello for about 5 years now. I've performed on stage many times, both solo, and with various bands.

I'm currently working on a new solo album, after not having recorded any solo music in 4 years, so I'm excited to share that with everyone when it's done!



JW: *Who are some of your favorite artists?*

Star: David Mack, Jenny Holzer, Matthew Woodson, Mark Z Danielewski, Tarsem, Yoni Wolf, Alfons Mucha, Michel Gondry.

JW: *Is web design a hobby, or can you be commissioned to create websites for potential customers?*

Star: Web Design is actually my day job. I work for kink.com coding html & css for all of their bdsm & fetish websites. This means that I rarely do freelance web work, as I spend all day writing code and I'd much rather spend my free time drawing or writing music.

JW: *Any hints for someone trying to break into the professional artist field?*

Star: If you don't have a website, get one. If you have a website, put a blog on it. If you have a blog, get a twitter account as well. While you're at it, register your username of choice on every damn social network you know of. Be consistent. Develop yourself like a brand. Talk to other people in your field, both on social networks, and in person. Go to conferences. Turn your internet relationships with colleagues into

real ones. Learn what you can by observation, and the rest by acting. Don't be afraid to experiment or make mistakes. Above all else, create!

JW: *You just received a free airline ticket to anywhere in the world, where an apartment and \$50K are waiting for you. Where would you fly to?*

Star: Probably France, since it's beautiful and I speak enough French to get by. Although I'd love to go to Tokyo if I had any grasp at all of the language.

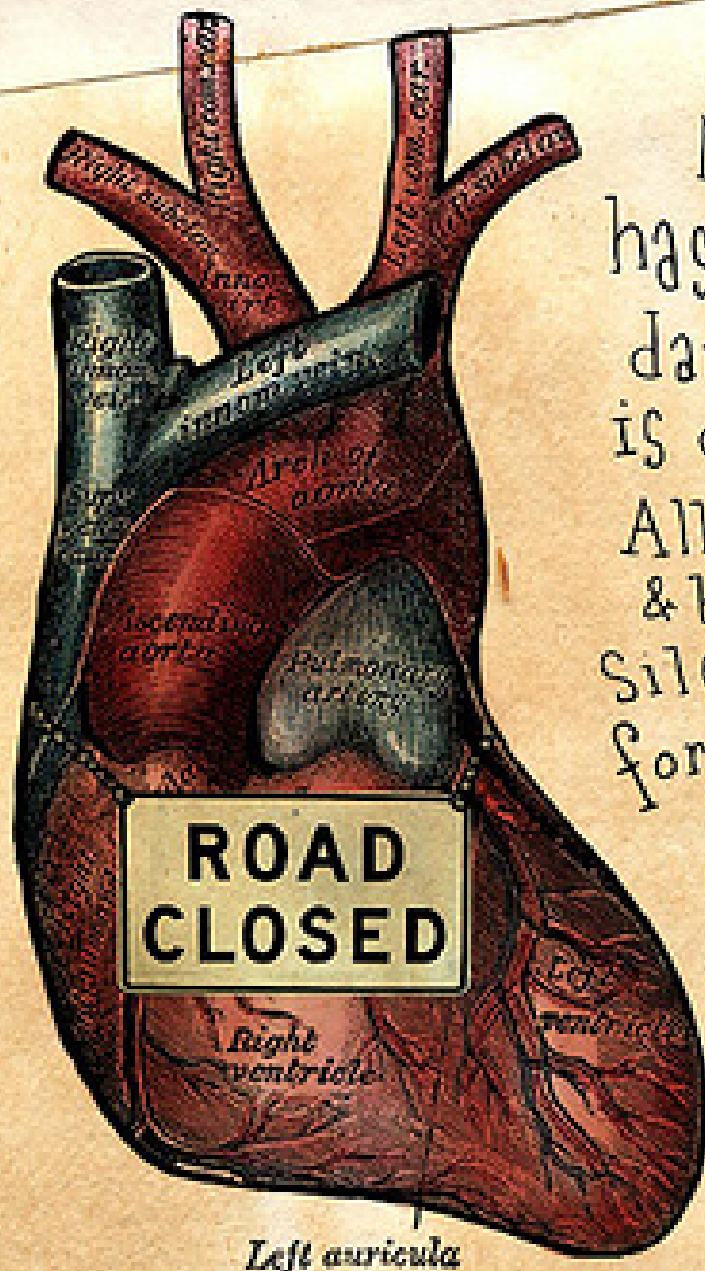
JW: *Ok, we had Freddy vs. Jason, and Alien vs. Predator. What would be the outcome of Star St. Germain vs. Kathy Bates, you know, that chick from Misery?*

Star: I think that unless she played dirty, I'd win. She looks slow, and I wear rollerskates.



visit Star's website: www.thisisstar.com

SEPT 16 2008



My heart
has blackout
dates & this
is one of them.
All the humming
& buzzing now
silent, I move
forward without
light or
sound or
meaning.

PRAYER DAY

by Ricardo Delgado

“I WONDER WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE to do that to each other?” gulped the long-limbed crustacean, who wore a construction hard hat and a cheap suit. He stood in a dark, dusty chamber with the Detective, a pudgy amphibian and an android. Music, shouts and dancing pounded down at them from a distant hole in the ceiling of the sepulcher-like structure that they stood in. Small clods of dirt, loosened by the commotion above, showered down intermittently. The scent of fresh-dug earth and blood mingled.

“Whenever there’s killin’ involved,” said the Detective, “Ya gotta work from the get-go that anything’s possible.”

“Sorry to pull you in on a holiday Detective,” said the crustacean. “Prayer Day only comes once a year, and everybody parties. My name’s Gaius Timor. I’m in City Planning.”

Timor stuck out a clawed hand and the Detective shook it.

“He was just sitting alone in a packed bar,” clipped the android, whose design steered more toward mechanical reptile. An awkward, poorly tailored suit lumped over the sleek metal frame. “Biggest day on the planet, and he’s alone with a drink.”

“Thanks, One,” snapped The Detective, with a quick, world-weary glance. He was humanoid, wore a trench coat over slacks and an old shirt, with a sharp chin, olive skin and a big, middle-aged ex-athlete’s body. A large, holstered weapon sat under the Detective’s left arm like a kitten in front of a fireplace.

“You’re welcome,” said One, ignoring the sarcasm. He turned to Timor and the amphibian, then jerked a gun-metal grey thumb claw at the Detective as he said, “War Head Four-Six-Five-Two-Five-Zero here is a freelance investigator assigned to this case via the New Jerusalem City Freelance Investigator Edict. He is a former police officer but has temporary jurisdictional powers as relates to this specific case, even in the extreme event of execution—”

“Okay,” said the Detective as he turned back to toss another annoyed look at the android. “They get it.”

In front of them lay the bodies.

One was an arthropod, six long spider arms sticking out of a large shirt and two others out of a pair of beaten-up pants. Multiple eyes stared vacant at them like a last wish. The other victim was a cephalopod, humanoid in form until a tentacled face and simple eyes led up to a domed, cuttlefish-like carapace. Worker overalls covered the cephalopod’s body. They both lay on the dirt floor, with jagged digging tools thrust into the other’s torso. A swimming pool of blood congealed under the bodies, and the cephalopod had spat ink out of its mouth and onto the petrified face of the arthropod. Agony had been water-colored over their faces with the wet, cold brush of violence.

“You the one that found the bodies?” nodded The Detective at Timor. “ID scan everybody here, One.”

“Check,” said One. Ninety percent mechanical, a few chunks of brain matter floated around in a clear brain carapace. The rest was metal exo-skeleton. “Hold Still for a moment everyone while I scan the ID chip implanted in your shoulders. Thank you. Processing.”

“Nope,” said Timor with a shake of his head. He pointed at the old amphibian that stood in a distant corner of the crypt, wiping his sweaty brow with a weathered handkerchief. “This is your guy. Found ‘em and called me. He’s Burnett Urbanitas, our Archeological Advisor from The University of New Jerusalem.”

Timor chuckled at the amphibian’s nervousness, which annoyed the Detective. He gave Timor a long look-over before his gaze slid over to the archeologist.

Overalls covered a plump yet time-worn body, which resembled frog more than humanoid. A pair of glasses had been pulled back over the smallish amphibian’s bulbous forehead, which sported a small triangular tattoo. Urbanitas’ wrinkled, grandfatherly eyes danced to avoid The Detective’s, and instead settled on a smaller, similar tattoo on the forehead. Urbanitas gave a quick bow and said, “We are all one, young man.”

With a respectful dip of his head, The Detective checked the older man’s hands as he replied, “We are all one, sir.”

No blood on the hands.

And Urbanitas’ boots had mud on them and nothing

else.

"You Arics and yer little bows crack me up," laughed Timor. He was pointedly ignored, until One began, "It's a traditional—"

"I know," grumbled Timor.

After he cleared his throat, Urbanitas pointed a nervous finger at The Detective and managed to say, "What is your name, young man—"

"I'm sorry professor," said One, "but by edict of the New Jerusalem Politburo, War Heads are not allowed to give out their birth names. He is War Head number Four-Six-Five-Two-Five-Zero, and citizens must refer to War Head Investigators past and present as 'Detective'."

Annoyed at Timor and One's rudeness, The Detective softened his voice as he said, "Professor Urbanitas, what is this place?"

As his focus was changed from a double-murder to archeology, Urbanitas' nerves left him like a bad woman in the night, and with a grand wave of his withered arm the old amphibian said, "This is the find of a lifetime."

They all stood on sleek, plastic floorboards in a moldy, stone-lined crypt, sixty feet long, twenty foot wide and seven feet tall. Everything around them seemed covered with reddish dust and cobwebs. Long, fat cables intertwined along the walls from the opening at the distant end of the crypt and ended in complex lighting systems that hummed along, illuminating an entire brood of mummies with the first light they had seen in millennia.

About thirty of the wrapped, shrouded or exposed corpses surrounded them, reclining along the walls. In vacant mouths were ancient, silent screams. Bulbous, fungi-ridden insect heads, some of them with no eyes, dangled like broken piñatas from shoulders covered with wrappings created when the planet was at another space and time. Scores of clay jars with complex paint jobs tucked into pockets of space between the many bent, multiple elbows and knees. Hieroglyphs, petroglyphs and runes lined the room like spices at an open-air market. The odors of dust, mold, decomposing garbage and death sat in the room like a large animal in a bathroom stall.

Underneath the transparent floorboards was one last colossal occupant: this mummy's gills and fish-like body had been wrapped in countless reams of wrappings. Its tail fin bones protruding jaggedly out of the shallow ground it had been buried in. Arms that defied both humanoid and cichlid anatomy gnarled around the bulbous, swollen torso. This last denizen spanned the entire length of the crypt. Crusty necklaces, rusted rings and a

green-used-to-be-gold headwear lay on the fish mummy's rotting skull like a pharaoh's crown.

"Microchip ID scan complete," said One. "Identities of all at Crime Scene conformed and relayed Downtown. Checking on Criminal Records."

As he waved a flashlight over the head of the cichlid mummy and the two victims, The Detective said, "Cool, go to Deepscan on the victims."

"Check."

"So," continued the Detective as he pointed a big digit at the cichlid, "this big mummy, haven't seen that in the books, seems pretty rare—"

"Yes Detective," said Urbanitas in a fever of excitement. "I see that you know about our 'diggings in the dirt'. This is indeed a discovery of monumental proportions. I had already begun to prepare my paper. This is a mummy of royal distinction from this planet's many throes and epochs of evolution. Age of Water, I reckon, and over one hundred and fifty million years old—"

"These younger, uh, more recent mummies—are they Servants?" said the Detective in a whisper.

After a gulp that tried to keep his scientific sanity intact, Professor Urbanitas managed, "Yes, young man, this might be the last Court of Servants. Headed by that legendary manifestation of evil, Servant Prime. They ruthlessly tried to hunt down the Earth Man when he descended to our world."

"That's all still conjecture," interjected the crustacean.

Urbanitas noted the intricate jewelry under the loosened collar of the crustacean and said, "I—I do not wish to offend Geneticist dogma, Mister Timor—"

"Not so long as you keep your Aric agenda in perspective, Professor. Remember that the Earth Man's story is simply legend according to Geneticist texts—"

"Dude, relax," said the Detective. "He just has an opinion. Just like you, me and everybody else." After he took a flashlight out of his coat pocket and dropped an inverted cone of light onto the victims, The Detective continued with, "Prof, who are these guys?"

Professor Urbanitas sighed like all the life had run out of him. "These are two of the City's Contract Archeologists, Mithradetes Languidas and his fellow digger, Demetrius Exerabo."

"Demi was nice enough," interrupted Timor. "An Aric like you guys, but that Languidas was a filthy Ishunite. Dunno how we hired him, but whatever. City's looking to build at this location, and we always have to survey any new or reused construction sites for any possible ar-

cheological remains. Pain in the butt, if you ask me, but it's the law."

"And so these guys were doin' a quick survey and found this? Pretty lucky," said the Detective, again annoyed with the crustacean.

Urbanitas' eyes sparkled with tears as he looked over the bodies. "I pushed for Mithradetes, Mister Timor. That's how he got hired. They were—are graduate students of mine, as is Demetrius' wife Yue. She will be crushed. What could have happened?"

"Couple of shovel bums stab each other, what's the big deal?" said Timor with a dry shrug. "Can't we get them out of here, plop all of these mummies into the local museum and get on with our lives? The schedule—"

"No, no, and I don't care about yer schedule," growled the Detective.

Urbanitas' voice dropped to nothing. "I need to call my wife. My phone is in my bag outside."

The Detective reached into his coat and fished out a cell phone, which he handed to the professor. "Hey, call her from here."

"Yes, please stay," said One. "We have not eliminated you as a suspect, so please do not leave the scene of the crime..." One's voice trailed off as the android read The Detective's lightning bolt of a stare.

Urbanitas' gasped turned Timor and The Detective back to him, and they followed his eyes past the head of the fossilized cichlid mummy to a spot on the wall. Hieroglyphs lined the crypt and depicted an elaborate scene involving the Servants seated in an ornate system of seats. In the middle of the scene, a section of the wall had been cut out like a slice out of the middle of a cake.

"It's gone!" shouted Urbanitas. "This find is nothing without it! Who could have taken it?"

"Okay," said the Detective as he illuminated the damaged wall, "We'll figure this tablet theft out as we go. Let's keep focus on the two victims here. Professor, when did you find them? Did you report it right away?"

"Just found them an hour ago," gulped Urbanitas. "Called Timor here straight away. Everything was fine this morning. We all joked about working on Prayer Day. I was going to have everyone home for dinner tonight. Irina—my wife, is working on it as we speak."

The Detective gave the archeologist a soft, sympathetic pat in the back before he knelt down to the bodies. After putting the back of his hand on the neck of the cephalopod, the Detective said, "Body's still warm." He turned to One. "Globalnet and police database search for known

associates, aliases and addresses. And scan the tools for prints."

"Check. Criminal Records for everyone here are clean. Except for yours, of course."

A dirty frown was shot at One. "Just do what I tell ya and keep yer opinions to yerself."

"Why check for known associates?" asked Urbanitas.

"Need to find the wife. Real fast."

"Prints on tools belong to the person holding the weapon," said One. "Rest of tools are clean. Initiated city-wide scan on the wife's ID chip."

"Got it," said the Detective. "The tools got wiped down. Really need to find the wife and any other members of the dig, hear their story."

"Well, the only other people on the site were Yue, Demetrius' wife, and Elam Subdolus, a Graduate student. They were the whole team."

"And where are they now?"

Timor cleared his throat as a way to interrupt and said, "I can tell you that we rented a motel room for the team, and they worked in shifts. It's not the most glamorous job, and our budget is not the healthiest."

"Where's the motel?"

"Across the river," added Urbanitas. "We would just ferry across."

"Location of ID chip confirmed," chirped One. "Right across the street."

"One, get a couple of Synths to watch this dig, tell 'em it's a crime scene—"

"We don't have anyone to spare," said One. "This is Prayer Day, and the whole city is crammed along the Ankor, and the ferry steersman probably won't cross during the ceremonies—"

"Yeah, I know," grimaced the Detective. He turned to Timor and Urbanitas. "We need to seal this crypt up and get over to the motel as soon as possible. One, call the motel and ask if they are still—"

"Called them while we spoke. Talked to the front desk, a gruff woman named Rowena, who said that they have not checked out—"

"The tablet—" gasped Urbanitas.

"How much could they get for it, assuming that's what this is all about."

"Enough to retire. The black market for antiquities is always flooded with looted relics—"

"Yes, but this is a rarity, a scene that places the Earth Man, founder of the major faiths of this planet—"

"Not the Geneticist Faith," interjected Timor. "We be-

lieve in the Ancients and Creator Being—“

“He named this city,” sniffed Urbanitas.

“Speculation,” growled Timor.

“Okay, let’s not get into a religious debate here. The tablet sounds like it’s worth a lot, and that makes it a pretty good motive. Let’s get it back and find out who killed these men.”

“Perhaps they did gut each other,” said Timor. “Not the first time and Aric and Ishunite killed out of theological fervor. It’s in their inferior blood.”

“If ya believe that,” said the Detective, “then yer dumber than I already think ya are.”

“When I arrived,” said Urbanitas, “the cover had been pulled over the first test pit, which had become the entrance to the crypt.”

“Those fuckin’ Ishunites,” growled Timor.

“Actually, Yue and Elam are both Geneticists,” said Urbanitas.

“Let’s go. And One, help me to re-cover the crypt. This is still a crime scene. Text the Coroner to meet us at this location, give him temporary jurisdictional powers to open the crypt and stay in contact with them until we can get back.”

“Check,” said One. “All the Patrol Float Cars are booked. No Synth Officers available. There’s a hijacking upriver, two riots downriver, as well as the usual Prayer Day crime wave. How are we going to get across river if the ferry’s out?”

“We’ll figure it out,” said the Detective.

Billions of flower petals cascaded down from upper-level streets and onto hundreds of thousands of worshippers of all species. Shafts of mid-afternoon light sliced through the air, illuminating the petals in brief but well-earned halos. Hundreds of mammalian, arthropod and air-breathing cichlid worshippers waded into the clear, crisp aquamarine Ankor River, which cut a jagged path through the mega-city known as New Jerusalem. A battering ram of noise overwhelmed One, Timor, Urbanitas and The Detective once they climbed out of the crypt. A small fence around the holes and the generators kept the dig site from being swallowed up by the raucous party.

Skyscrapers stretched up to the sky as if to beseech a higher power to rid them of the stench, crime and utter despair that flooded their ground floors on a daily basis. A congregation of insect families carried shrouded bodies of their deceased to the edge of the water. Urchin children frolicked in the water, under the watchful eyes

of their shrouded parents. The river was an artery of the ancient history of the planet to a modern metropolis, and multitudes of cultures, species and faiths congregated around the waters, on their knees on worn stone steps or shiny, new tile-tined wading pools to profess their faith in a faithless town. Tens of thousands of isopod, arthropod, reptilian, insect, mammalian and amphibian children placed lit candles on lily pads and pushed them into the tranquil, languid current. The cascading pink, peach and ivory petals garnished the river with more dignity than it or the city could have ever deserved, yet for a few moments, the inhabitants of New Jerusalem felt like their life mattered a little, and this was enough for them to live their lives.

An open casket, with the corpse of an octogenarian isopod inside, was set fire to, next to a retired amphibian, wading his creaking, ten-foot tall bulk into the water filled with playing reptilian infants below. After they had pulled themselves up out of the hole in the pavement, The Detective, Urbanitas, Timor and One began to push their way through the congested sidewalk and toward the river. The Detective instantly grabbed his wallet and shoved it into his right front pants pocket, flared open his trench coat so that his pistol was visible. He then surged through the unruly, repentant mob.

He ignored the arachnid punk who opened his trench coat to show off the watches and set of jewelry he carried in the coat liner. A grieving insect couple to the Detective’s left carried a tiny coffin to the river. To his right, a few boozing amphibian frat boys, busy downing beer, looked The Detective over before one of them threw up on his shoes. They laughed as he resisted the urge to put a forearm into the silly, drunken grins. Two arachnid females blew kisses at him as they sloshed their drinks around. A backward glance told The Detective that he’d almost lost Urbanitas, who he grabbed and gently placed in front of himself. Through the squeals, shrieks and shouts the Detective could make out Urbanitas say something like “—at about the others—”

At that instant One’s electronic claw of a hand was on his shoulder, and the buzz of the android’s voice zapped, “Quelled one of the riots. Two Patrol units on the way,” to which The Detective shouted/replied, “Tell one of ‘em to go to the crime scene and the other to the motel. And text my cell with photos of the wife and co-worker.”

“Check,” shouted One, barely heard over the rage of sounds.

The ferry was where The Detective had seen it earlier

in the day. An expansive wooden raft that would not pass a City Inspection was tethered to an even flimsier dock. On the raft stood a twenty-foot tall walking stick, a telephone pole sized piece of lumber between its massive hands. The stick watched the coffins, lily pads and petals all float downstream. Its' lips trembled. The Detective saw the huge creature was deep in prayer.

The Detective waited for the stick to notice him, and when it did not he tapped the massive insect on the leg and pointed across the congested, garnished river. The massive thing leaned over and said in a deep, lilting voice, "No gettin' over there 'till this is over, brudder."

"Sorry man, but I'm a War Head investigating a murder, we need to cross the Ankor, and yer gonna take us," said The Detective, palming his wallet ID and giving the big creature an eyeful of identification.

"This is crazy, man. Too many people in the river. Plus I'm Ishunite, and I'm praying."

"Are all of your tax filings for the past seven years in order, sir?" spat One.

"Get us over there or I'm gonna pull yer license," snapped Timor, leaning over One's shoulder and jabbing a finger at the big steersman.

"Hey," said the Detective with backward glance filled with visible annoyance, "No need for threats."

After he turned back to the huge stick, the Detective said, "Just get us across, and I'll tip ya plenty. Police investigation. Two people died today. Please."

With an angry few seconds of thought, the walking stick gave them a gruff wave onto the raft, un-tethered and pushed off into the river. The raft creaked and groaned as it bore their weight toward the middle of the churning waters. With one shove of the colossal stick, a powerful thrust took them five, ten, twenty feet out into the waters. Boos peppered them from behind, but The Detective watched the throng appear to glide away from the raft with quick, analytical thoughts racing through his mind and over his face. One, Timor and Urbanitas just stood there, worshipped by the petals that danced around them before dying in the river. The football stadium roar of the crowd at river's edge dissipated as well.

"So, you were out getting lunch for the crew when the murder took place?" said The Detective.

"Yes, how did you know?" asked Urbanitas after an astonished reaction.

"Makes sense that's what you were doin', but didya get a receipt?"

After a scrambling search through his shirt and pants pockets, Urbanitas pulled out a few wrinkled-up pieces of paper and handed one of them to the Detective.

"You don't believe me."

"Scan this," said the Detective as he handed the receipt to One. "Yeah, I believe ya, but it gives me another reason to eliminate you as a suspect. And it'll help when I file the report."

"He could have stabbed the both of them, stolen the tablet and framed the others," spat Timor, whose face leaned into the conversation."

"He would have sold the thing already, but that's why he's comin' with us. Just to make sure. Do we have a record of the call-in?" asked the Detective after a glance at One. Then he jabbed an index finger at Timor. "And another thing, shut up and keep yer opinions to yerself unless I ask ya."

"Checking main telephone database," said One. "And the two photos have been sent to your cell phone."

"What? Why—"

"Got 'em, One," said the Detective after he flipped open his phone. He looked at Timor and snarled, "Cuz I don't like ya. Suppose you were in yer office all morning right? And an assistant that can place yer butt in yer chair while the crime was committed?"

"Hey, I don't like what you're insinuating!"

They glared at each other for a few seconds, and all everyone heard was the churning of the waters by the steersman's prodigious piece of wood. Candles on lily pads, petals and coffins bumped against the raft. The walking stick gave a long heave at his telephone pole and watched the staring contest. The Detective did not blink, and Timor's stare dissolved like a piece of candy on a hot sidewalk.

"Do ya have an assistant that places ya at the office or not?"

"I don't like your Aric delusions—"

"Yes or no?"

"Everyone at my level does."

"Okay," said The Detective, as he jabbed his hands into his trench coat pockets and gave a livid Timor his back. "Now, shut up. Yer a loudmouth bigot and I don't like ya. One, call his office and double-check his story with his assistant. Remind her your recordings are admissible."

He turned to Urbanitas. "Speaking of losers, I dealt with a nut job a while back that thought he was a Servant. Was killin' men, women, kids. Dragged 'em down

into the sewers and sacrificed 'em before he ate 'em. Nobody could catch 'im."

"Was it that Whisperer killer? It had the whole city in a terror. It must have imagined itself to be three thousand years old."

"Yeah, one of the worst."

"Were you the one that caught this beast?," said the professor with a shudder.

"Nope. Chased it around the sewers. Police shot him—it down. Did you know Professor Arthur Majister over at the University?"

"Why yes, poor Arthur. Died in his own office."

"Yep. We weren't good friends, but I miss him. He helped me once in a while with a case, he got involved in one and that's when he was murdered."

"Yes," said Urbanitas. "In his own office, if I recollect. But you musn't blame yourself, my boy."

"Oh, no?"

"Arthur was a recluse, and if he offered to help you, then he must have thought highly of you. Blame this city and its corrosion, but do not lay fault at your own doorstep. We all should do our part to make this world a better place when we leave it, and Arthur believed this wholeheartedly, so his help to you was part of his philosophy."

After a moment of thought, The Detective nodded at Urbanitas and said, "Hey, thanks. Needed to hear that."

They neared the other edge of the Ankor, and the crowd noise began to swell again. The Walking stick used its massive pole to push aside a gaggle of smallish anoles, trilobites and pill bugs that were reverentially tossing hardened pieces of dung into the river. Next to them, mammalian couples of all ages dunked their slumbering infants under the waters, only to have them emerge shrieking with fright. The Detective pivoted, forked out his wallet and gave the ferryman a few large bills. "Thanks, man. Sorry ta interrupt."

"You are welcome," said the stick in his baritone voice. The steersman waved everyone off the raft as it touched the crowded concrete steps. A group of invertebrate businessmen tried to step onto the barge, but the stick waved them off with a wave of its titanic arm.

"Young man, do you have any events scheduled for Prayer Night tonight?" asked Urbanitas, who had watched The Detective deal with the ferryman.

A shadow of surprise spread over The Detective's face as he stepped off the raft, only to be replaced by the stan-

dard social mask in seconds. "Uh, yep. Yeah I do."

"Well, It's just, my wife has made this dinner, and from what One was saying about finding you in a pub, I thought you might not have plans. I thought I might invite you to sup with us on this special day."

They zig-zagged up the crowded steps and pushed through the mob as it cheered, prayed and cavorted at river's edge.

"Yeah. One, did you got a holda Urbanita's call ta Timor?"

Out of One's metal reptilian head poked a small, black cylinder. "Assistant confirms Timor's alibi. Here's the call file." They crowded around to hear a dial tone, followed by the sound of a phone line becoming active. "Timor."

"Giaus," said the mike. "It's Burnett. Mithradetes! Demitrius! Both dead! I just came back with Lunch, and—and, I found them! Stabbed each other! Yue and Elam are nowhere to be seen! You must call it in!"

"Shit!" said Timor's voice. "What are we going to do? We're so far behind schedule already. Was it as accident? Perhaps we can take care of this internally—"

"Gaius, your words are callous. If you don't call emergency, I will."

"Okay, okay, I'll call it in."

"I'll wait at the crypt for the authorities to arrive."

"I'll call it in and meet you there."

With the sound of the phone call ending, The Detective shot a dirty smirk at Timor, who looked like he'd prefer to be somewhere else, before he nodded at Urbanitas.

"Okay, where's the motel?"

"Over there," said the professor, pointed to a decade-old place that had seen better days.

"One, have the patrol floats landed?"

"Both. Check. The Prime Investigator has just sent me a text. He demands an update."

"Ten minutes to Solution. And tell the Synths at the hotel to cover the parking lot entrance, and that we're going in through the front and up the main elevators."

"Done."

They moved through the crowd like salmon contesting a river.

A vendor machine that dispensed condoms and candy bars was the highlight of the small, worn lobby. Vomit green shag carpeting that should have been changed a decade ago lined the rectangular lobby. Three small trash cans were empty, but wrappers and crumpled bills lined

the walls. One set of glass doors led out to the crowd and Prayer Day, the other out to a parking garage. The smell of old egg and pesticides combined to give the room an aura of disgust. A female octopi humanoid sat behind the sagging wooden counter and cracked chewing gum like a pistol shot. Her 'hair' was made up into an elaborate bun as she re-read a gossip magazine for the eight time within the week. A wooden door behind the female led to her dreary private life. Her dress was too tight and her earrings were too big and too cheap. A set of stairs led up to even cheaper rooms.

She brightened as The Detective opened the glass door and sauntered into the lobby like a panther, followed by One, Timor and Urbanitas, who had sweat streaming down his pudgy amphibian face.

"Hey honey," said octopi girl with a leer.

The Detective held up his ID badge and said, "Police. We called before. Looking for—" He checked his cell for a second. "—Yue Exerabo and Elam Subdolos."

Octopi girl cracked her gum so hard it made the already nervous Urbanitas flinch. "Second floor. Room 212."

"They still in there?"

"Yep. Noisy bunch, if you know what I mean."

"Anybody in the adjoining rooms?"

"This ain't the kinda place where people stay long."

"Go to the back room. If you hear shots, get on the ground, shut up and don't move until we come and get ya."

"I know the drill," she sighed, and the octopi girl disappeared behind her dreary door as a Synth crept in from the parking garage door. Large, insect-like and mechanical, the Police Synth had multiple legs, arms and weapons, and was crowned with a mantis-like head with various lenses, sensors and microphones. Ribbons of oils, fluids and circuits flowed under its mechanical skin. The robotic officer oozed a perverse familiarity with violence.

"Second floor, room 212. Get behind me," said the Detective, "and don't shoot anyone."

If it had a mouth, the Police Synth would have frowned.

The Detective led, followed by Urbanitas, Timor, One and the Police Synth, cradling its rifles like they were newborn. As they crept up the stairs, the roar of the crowd outside reverberated through the walls, and Timor said, "What's going on out there?"

"Afternoon prayers," growled The Detective. "And shut up."

"I can wait in the lobby," gulped Urbanitas.

"Nope," said The Detective. "Need ya for the tablet stuff—"

A pounding came from the top of the steps. Not mechanical, but constant.

"What is that?" said One.

"They're getting' busy," laughed Timor. The Detective reached into his holster and pulled out his pistol, which was big enough to have its own postal address. The hallway door creaked open when he pushed it, and both the prayer chants outside and the pounding down the hall got louder. Cheaper carpeting lined the hallway, and something scuttled along the ground in the distance. One of the three lights worked, casting an eerie pallor to the hall. A single payphone adorned the wall behind the stairway door, and dozens of phone numbers radiated like scrawled petals from the battered machine. The first door had a torn sheet of paper that had '214' scrawled onto it in various languages.

Through the prayers, they crept down the hall.

Room 212 had a door on it that had bowed inward, as if it was ashamed to be seen with the rest of the disreputable rooms around it. The pounding was even louder, even overwhelming the prayers outside. After he waved Urbanitas, One and Timor back, The Detective pointed at the Synth and whispered, "I'm low, yer high, with yer rifles."

"Check," said the Synth, which moved to the other side of the door and crouched, eager to shoot something.

Urbanitas' brow, which had been furrowed with thought, suddenly jumped up. "That sound...! Open that door!"

The Detective pivoted and put his foot into the area around the doorknob. The door ripped open like a long-lost letter. He rushed into the room, pistol leading like a bloodhound. The room was tiny, with one bed in front of a beat up TV monitor and a set of drawers that looked like a dog had chewed on them for a while. Sleeping bags littered the floor. A sliding glass window behind them framed New Jerusalem in prayer.

Holding a chisel in mid-air was a young insect humanoid. Next to him, holding yet another chisel, was a female squid/humanoid. They both wore dirty smocks and were covered with dust. On the bed, laying in pieces on a blanket, was the tablet.

"What have you done?" cried Urbanitas.

"Only what our faith needed to be done," hissed the woman as she glared at Urbanitas.

"Keep yer hands up!" woofed The Detective.

"No!" spat the insect. "The Earthman is a myth, and your filthy Aric laws will not keep us from doing what must be done!"

With one motion, the insect threw the chisel to the bed, scooped up the blanket with the tablet inside and dove for the window. Two shots rang out from the Detective's weapon, and blood spurted out from two holes in each of the insect's pant legs. He squealed and fell to the ground. The squid woman began to step over the bed and The Detective's weapon pivoted toward her. "I don't wanna shoot ya."

Her face crinkled up like an eviction notice as she spat, "You don't even know what you are doing, Aric Filth!"

As he rose from his crouch, The Detective said, "Yue Exerabo and Elam Subdolus, yer both under arrest. The crime is murder in two charges and destruction of public property. Do you understand that under New Jerusalem jurisdictional laws, you are entitled only to an expedient trial and judgment, and under the Ishun Interspecies Code, a swift yet humane execution?"

"Theft as well," added One, as he and Timor slipped around the Synth and into the room.

While the injured insect moaned and drained blood onto the cheap shag, Urbanitas wriggled by The Detective and scooped up the blanket. He looked in and sighed. "The tablet's been hacked to pieces."

"Wanted to toss this...propaganda in the river," hissed Elam while One placed plastic handcuffs around his multiple wrists. "But there were too many damn people around."

"That tablet," seethed Yue as One tossed some cuffs at her, "was welcomed by my inbred husband and his filthy Ishunite compatriot. They were going to let the media turn this into some cherished discovery that would embarrass our faith, so when they refused to turn it over to us—"

She caught One's toss and began to curse as she slipped the cuffs around her wrists. After a second, the clear plastic things shrunk around so tight that she had to make fists to keep the blood flowing through her hands.

"Everything you say" sighed The Detective, "is being recorded by two robotic sources and will be admissible at your trial—"

"I don't give a shit!" snarled Yue. "They deserved it, and I thank The Creator Being that we were able to get this hunk of ancient lies over here and destroy it before my loser husband could try and make something out of his lousy life instead of dragging us around and digging up shopping centers and suburban developments."

"The tablet is very damaged," said Urbanitas, "but I can still see the Earthman's visage. It can be displayed shi way and still get the point across, thank goodness."

"What?" frothed Yue. She shot a stab of hate at Subdolus. "Did you not chip away at the main cartouche—"

Elam was yanked to his feet by the Synth. One took out a medkit from a compartment in his chest and applied quick-dry plastic sealant to the gunshot wounds on the insect's legs. Elam grimaced at the pain and at Yue. "We had like, what, thirty seconds before they kicked our damn door open—"

Another Synth appeared at the door. The Detective saw it, looked at One and said, "I'm outta here. Job's done."

Timor stepped into The Detective's field of vision. "I'm going to have the crypt moved in it's entirely, but this should not delay the construction more than a week or two. Will you reflect this in your report?"

"No, ya hafta clear it with the prof here," said The Detective as he pointed at Urbanitas. "And if I hear yer givin' him trouble, I'll come by ta chat. Got it?"

"Yes," said Timor as he slid away and out of the room.

"You can expect your usual fee to be in the bank account assigned to your freelance work tomorrow morning," said One.

"Thanks," said the Detective as he shook hands with the android. "You were a big help."

"And you certainly lived up to your file, Detective," said One, who shook his hand back. "And I mean it as a compliment."

"See ya, Professor," said The Detective as he clapped a hand onto Urbanitas' shoulder. The archeologist was absorbed as he had replaced the blanket on the bed and was looking it over. He had rearranged the pieces into their proper order, and the outline of a human astronaut being entertained by robed aliens formed, despite the damage from the chisel's assault.

"Oh yes, thank you, young man," said Urbanitas, too absorbed in the tablet's beauty to look up. He reached around his plump body with his right hand and shook

the Detective's with happiness and gratitude.

"See ya," said The Detective as he slid out the door.

A little later, the prayers and the partying had died outside the bar. "Hit me again, Dude," said the Detective as he slid his glass back at the trilobite bartender. The bar was emptier than a barn in the summer.

"Sorry man," said the bartender, "It's closin' time." The trilobite shot a sideways look at The Detective and followed it up with, "I gotta go see my family. I'm sure you got places to go, right?"

While The Detective mentally ran down the list of diners open during Prayer day, a soft, familiar voice behind him said, "Yes, he does."

He turned to see Professor Urbanitas with an amphibian female about his age. "Detective, this is Irina, my wife."

"Hey," said The Detective. "Nice ta meetcha. I know what yer tryin' ta do—"

"Good," said Irina. "So there won't be any argument. Our car is outside. You are our guest for dinner, young man. There is no room for disagreement."

"Yes ma'm," said The Detective as he slid off his barstool with a grin.



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A former laboratory technician turned home educator, Richard H. Fay now spends his days juggling various writing and art projects. He resides in Upstate New York with his wife, daughter, two cats, and a rather confused shepherd-chow mix. Legends, myths, folklore, and history all serve as inspiration for Richard's creative endeavours. He has illustrated his own poetic creations as well as the works of other writers and poets. His illustrations have appeared on-line and in-print in FLASHING SWORDS, ABANDONED TOWERS, THE WILLOWS, and other publications. More examples of his artwork can be seen at his web site, Azure Lion Productions: <http://azurelionproductions.com>



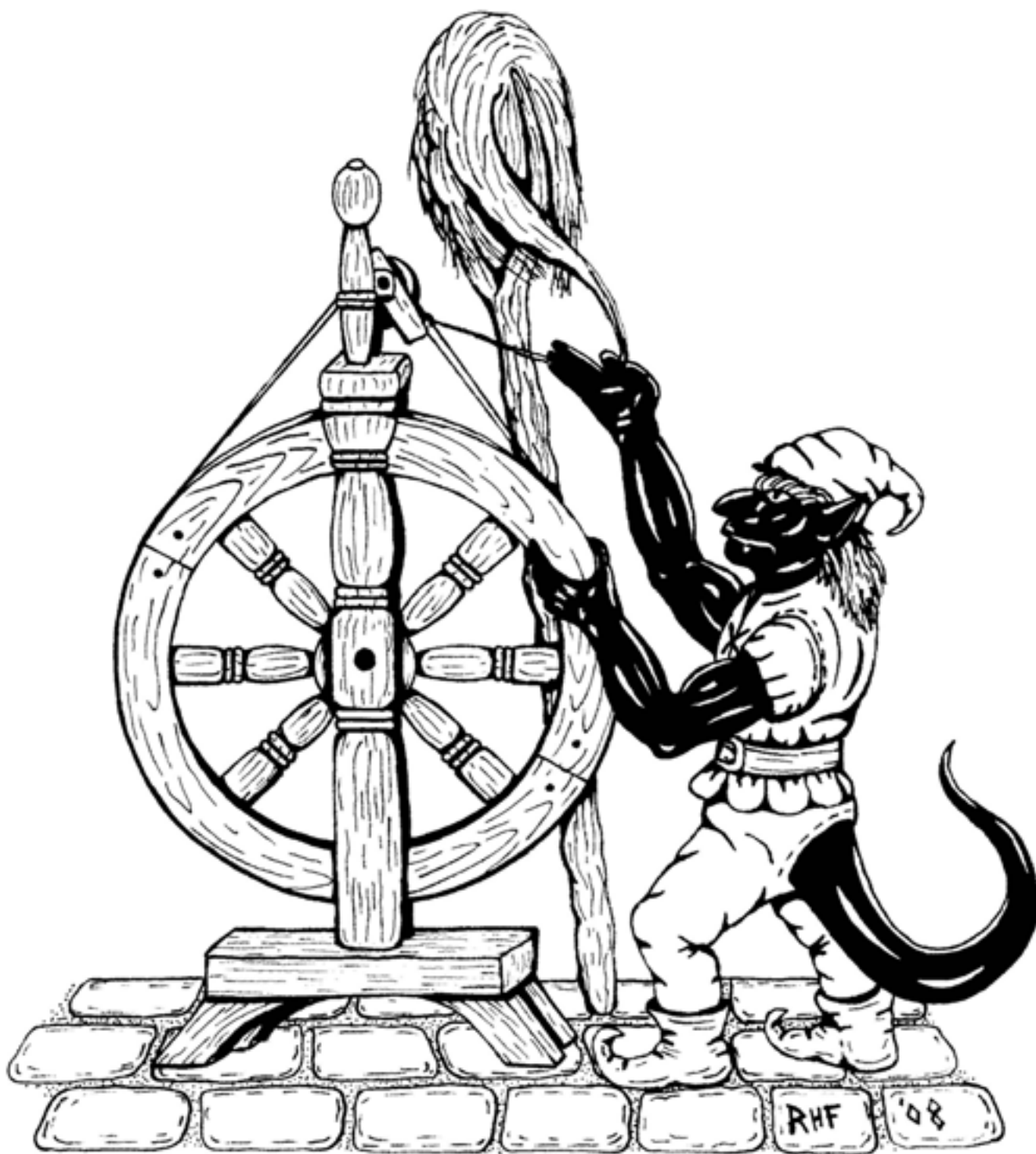
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"Tom-Tit-Tot"



"The Unseelie Court"

CYANIDE, MY LOVE

by Abigail Lambton

“LILIES?” ASKED THE FLORIST behind the counter. “People normally choose them for funerals, not weddings.”

Davey glanced at Helena knowingly.

“Yes, Lilies please” Helena repeated.

The blonde woman shrugged her shoulders and went about her work, picking the best flowers from the bucket and wrapping them in tissue paper. Helena took the time to look around the shop. There were hundreds of buckets of different coloured flowers. Ribbons and balloons for every occasion sat side by side with flower arrangements ready to be shipped off to the next funeral.

“So when’s the big day?” asked the florist over her narrow spectacles, trying to make conversation with the odd couple. He stood at least two feet higher than her, the shock of long black hair tied back into a ponytail. She was petite, all in black.

“It’s tomorrow,” answered Davey, smiling weakly at her as she handed him the flowers. He passed her the money and they turned to leave.

“I hope it all goes well for you!” the florist called after them. She watched them walk out into the clear autumn afternoon, puzzled.

They hadn’t told anyone that they were planning their own funeral. It would just be a tragic accident. The flowers were the last things on the list. They had chosen their plot in the graveyard, a headstone, and they had had a coffin especially built, big enough for both of them. Of course they hadn’t told the coffin makers why they wanted it so big. Davey had done a great job faking tears about his obese uncle Burt. Now everything was taken care of, all they had to do was wait.

Helena could smell her mother’s cooking as they walked up the path to their small family bungalow. She had lived here all her life. The small garden where she used to play as a child was now overgrown and impenetrable, yet it still held some rugged beauty for her. Since her father had his heart attack, he hadn’t done much around the house. The whitewashed walls showed signs of cracking and the red paint on the front door was peeling. But,

as her mum said, it made it look authentic. She pushed open the door and they stepped inside, kicking off their muddy boots.

“Hi” Helena called into the house.

She laid the flowers on the small side table and walked down the hall. She could hear the low murmur from the TV and the clattering of pots from further inside the house. She glanced into the living room. Her father hadn’t answered her call of greeting. He was sat, in his chair, slippers on and engrossed in the football on the TV. He looked old, his face taking on a yellow colour since his illness.

“Dad” she repeated.

He turned around, looking shocked.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” he said in his gruff voice.

Helena smiled and went through to the kitchen. Davey followed her. Her mother’s back was turned as she washed the pots in their large country sink.

“Hi mum” said Helena.

Davey slumped into one of the dining chairs, exhausted from their walk into town.

“Hello sweetheart. Are you ok?” she asked, not turning around to greet them, busy with her chores.

“I’m fine thanks. What’s cooking? It smells good”

“A full roast. Your favourite”

Helena felt a pang of guilt in the bottom of her gut.

Supper that night lasted longer than normal. Their last supper. The four of them ate and drank into the night. Davey had brought some wine and her mother had cooked a larger spread than normal. It all seemed too perfect to Helena. Was there some way that her parents knew what she intended to do? No that was impossible. They had made sure that all of their arrangements had been made in the greatest confidence. Davey had told Helena not to eat a lot tonight. She didn’t know why, but she knew it had something to do with tomorrow night. Davey had taken care of the method. He didn’t tell her what he had got, but he had told her that it would work better on an empty stomach. So they both picked at their plates and pushed the food around.. Davey always had dinner at Helena’s house. He had no-body to cook for him. He had lived alone since he was sixteen years old

The memories of his parents were still there at the back of his mind somewhere, but that is where he liked them to stay. Helena's father dosed, waking only when their voices were louder. When Helena and Davey left the table, the night was at its darkest. They said their goodnights then went to bed, to spend their last night together as a living couple.

Davey flicked the indicator and turned the car from the main road and onto the dirt track. The sunset painting the October skies a sea of fire. In the passenger seat, Helena was gazing out, watching the woods come into view. In this half darkness, they were a pool of black. She remembered the first time that they had made this drive together six years ago when they were still getting to know each other. In those awkward first months of a relationship when you are not sure whether its too soon to kiss. The place where they were headed was one of the lesser-known make out points in town and not many people went there. They liked to come up here because they knew that they would not be disturbed. Helena loved the view from the top. You could see right down into the town. She always joked that it looked liked a toy town from up there on the cliff. It made all of life's problems seem smaller and less serious. The incline was steep and the Ford complained underneath them. Rocks on the path made it bounce uncomfortably. Helena looked out into the dense trees, catching glimpses of her reflection in the car window. She had taken extra care over her make-up tonight. She wanted to look beautiful when she was found. Unexpectedly her heart was pounding in her chest. She had built herself up for this moment for the last two years. She didn't think that she would be nervous. But she was. She knew that beyond life, there was nothing. Once she was dead, she wouldn't feel anything, there was nothing to fear. But death to her was so final. They had opted for death over a wedding. When you marry someone you are joined for life, but when you die with someone, you are joined for eternity, Davey had said. Her stomach churned with hunger and apprehension. They hadn't eaten since supper the night before. She turned to look at him, his eyes were focussed straight ahead. There was no look of fear or apprehension on his face. A strong, emotionless expression. He wore his hair down around his shoulders. His jaw was unshaven and pricked with stubble. He saw her looking out of the corner of his eye and reached out a hand to place on her leg.

"You okay?" he asked her with a smile, glancing back

at the road to make sure he didn't veer off of the track and run into a tree. That's not how he wanted it to happen.

"Yeah I'm fine" she lied ".

"You nervous?" he asked, a taunting smirk on his lips.

"A little, aren't you?"

"I'm just excited. I've wanted this for so long. Helena, you need to understand that this will make us stronger. We will die together. At the same time. Holding hands. Joined forever"

The windscreen in front of them became illuminated and Davey slowed the car down to a gradual halt. The space between the edge of the forest and the edge of the cliff held just enough room for one car. Davey cut the engine. They sat in the sudden silence and listened. Davey closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Helena looked out over the view. Her mind was racing. The sun was halved by the skyline. Burning intensely. Using up the last of it's light. The sky, in waves of red, then pink, then blue. Midnight at the top.

"We were meant to do this today" Helena turned and saw that Davey had opened his eyes. "It's so perfect". Davey opened the car door and stooped out. Leaving it open, he walked around the car looking all around to make sure there was nobody there. He climbed back in, bringing a gust of cold autumn air in with him. Helena shivered. He pushed the lock on his door and motioned for Helena to do the same. Then he held out his hand and took hers. They sat still in their seats and watched the sun silently slip away, replaced by the night. The last sunset. When it was gone, Helena turned to Davey

"I love you," she whispered, not wanting to ruin the silence.

He leaned over and they kissed. Each time their lips met the passion grew and grew. Neither wanting to pull away, but Davey gently pushed her back.

"It's time, he announced"

He leaned past Helena to open the glove box and with one hand he removed a small silver box. Helena stared at it in alarm. They had spoken about how they would do it, but Davey hadn't said anything else. She had made it clear that she didn't want there to be any mess. Davey settled back into his seat and held out the box in front of him.

"Are you ready?" He asked

Helena's heart beat wildly in her chest. There was no going back now. They were here. This is it. This is the end. She nodded. He lifted up the lid. It gave a tiny groan.

The polished metal glimmered in the lights of the city. Helena leaned closer to get a better look. Inside were two vials, nestled into a silk lining. He lifted one out with his painted nails and held it up in front of him. The liquid inside was black.

"What is it?" Helena asked.

"Cyanide, my love" he whispered

"Cyanide?" she was a little stunned "Where the hell did you get that from?"

"Let's just say it was a long story" he was smiling.

"We just bite them and wait. On an empty stomach it will only take a matter of minutes"

He placed the vial that he was holding, into the palm of her hands. Helena took the remaining one and gave it to Davey. He put the empty box onto the dashboard. They both sat there for a long while just examining the vials. Watching the liquid moving inside. Helena was imagining that same liquid running through her body and into her brain. She turned to look at Davey and he met her gaze. They leaned in tentatively and kissed each other. A caring, loving kiss. The cautious kiss of young lovers, or the kiss of a newly married couple.

"I love you Helena"

"I love you too" she replied

They took one last look at the sleeping city and put the vials into their mouths.

For a while, the silence reigned. The glass was cold on her tongue as she moved it around her mouth. She heard the muted sound of breaking glass from Davey's mouth. She bit down on hers. But it slid between her teeth and rolled back onto her tongue. The pressure hadn't been enough. She used her tongue to position it again, this time between the stronger teeth at the back of her mouth. While she did this she tried to keep her eyes forwards. She tried not to glance over at Davey. He was completely still. Was he dead yet? She began to push down with her teeth. The lump in her throat throbbing against her skin. Waiting to hear the tiny noise and feel the liquid spill across her mouth. There was movement next to her. Davey's body had begun to shake. She pressed down harder with her teeth. Her eyes wanting to look over. She tried to keep them ahead. Looking at the peaceful city, but she gave in and looked. His eyes had rolled back into his skull and he was fitting. She tried to bite again. She felt the vial weaken. Davey was convulsing wildly now, small specks of blood were leaving his mouth and sliding down his chin. Helena spat the vial into the foot well.

"Davey! Davey!" her voice left her in gasps

She pulled open his mouth and tried to scrape the liquid from his tongue. The smell was putrid. She held her breath. She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him violently.

"Davey stop! Davey wake up!" she was sobbing. Her eyes wild with disbelief. What had he done?

She put her fingers into his eyes. Grasping for any signs of life. She tried to pull them back down. She tried to stop his body from flailing wildly. She slapped his face and shook him. Screaming in frustration.

"Davey" her voice was frantic now.

Huge globules of sweat ran off of her forehead. Fear and exertion. Tears joined the sweat half way down her face. Both landing on the dying body beneath her. She pulled his hair and slapped him on the back. She screamed in his ears. Then he was still. Her screams echoed in the night. His body slumped against the door of the car. Helena was left sitting on top of him in disbelief. Her mouth open. She was sobbing. Convulsing. Refusing to believe what had just happened.

"No. No" she whispered over and over again. She clambered off of the dead man and back into her seat. The lights of the city no longer a beautiful vista, but now prying eyes. Blaming eyes. She leaned forward and felt frantically around on the floor for the vial. She couldn't live after what she had just seen. Now she wanted to die more than ever. She strained her arm. Her hand grasped violently all around. But to no avail. She was shaking violently like Davey was just minutes earlier when there was still life in his veins. But her convulsions came from terror. Her head was shaking as if in the face of truth. Still she chanted "no, no, no" over and over again. She scrambled for the handle of the door. Her sweaty palms slipping over it. She managed to get the door open and she fell out onto the cold grass. Stumbling to her feet, she ran for the woods. Her legs were weak. She fell into the mud but picked herself up and carried on. She had to get away from that place. She looked back only once to make sure that he was really dead. That he wasn't following her. It took her a long time to get back down the track. When she finally emerged onto the main road, she was disorientated. Her body taking her in all directions. Her mind in a world of it's own. She didn't want to be seen. She didn't hitch a lift. She ran home. The October moon, staring down at her as she went.

It was raining on the day of the funeral. Not the pleas-

ant rain that falls in mid summer, that cools your skin when it gets too hot. It was the ice-cold rain that taps at your face relentlessly and chills you to the bone. The rain that soaks through your clothes and makes you uncomfortable. Helena's head was buried in her mother's arm and covered by her dark, wet hair. She clung to her mother like a child, scared at a pantomime. This sinister pantomime. She couldn't look at the coffin. She couldn't bear to look around at the grieving faces, the hearts torn in two. She kept her head buried there in the warmth of her mother's jacket that smelled like fabric softener. She stared into the darkness, watching the shapes behind her eyes morph and move. The anguish on the faces of the few people that were in attendance made up for the lack of mourners. There was none of Davey's family. Just Helena's and a few of their close friends. Everyone had been shocked at the news of Davey's suicide. But not her. She could have stopped him. But she let him do it. Her tears began again and soaked small patches of fabric on her mother's sleeve. She thought about how she could have escaped this torment. If she had just bitten a little harder on the vial, she could be lying peacefully in the coffin next to Davey, in the white dress that she had chosen. In the coffin that had just been lowered into the ground. She could be somewhere else. Nice and dead. But here she was, racked with guilt, on Cemetery Hill, interring the man that she had once loved. Would have given her life for. But didn't. This was not how it was supposed to happen.

The last words of the priest droned in her mind. She could hear the other mourners squelching away from the site of the grave. Back to the slow procession of cars that would take them to the wake. Black suits with muddied trousers. Tilted black hats. Solemn faces. Helena stood still. Waiting for them all to be gone. Only then did she look at the real world. The gaping hole. The pile of sodden earth. She didn't walk to the edge to say her last goodbyes; she just stared at the gravestone. The one that they had picked out together. It read:

HERE LIES DAVEY MORNING
BORN AUG 1 1980
DIED OCT 27TH 2008
PEACE AT LAST

It wasn't the engraving that troubled her. It was the yawning gap underneath. The space left purposely for her

name. The perfectly polished black marble was aching for an etching: Helena Thorn. This urged her to leave. To turn and walk back to the black limousine. This wasn't happening. She dumped herself into the backseat. The overwhelming stench of leather and sadness. She tried to convince herself that it wasn't happening.

The full moon leaked into the room, causing it to glow an eerie midnight blue. She lay still in bed on top of the covers. Her emotions had run dry and her cheeks were stinging. She stared dumbly at the ceiling, feeling more alone than she had ever felt in her life. Her parents had tried to comfort her, but they could say nothing to ease her pain. She had just screamed in frustration and ran away. Nothing could stop the guilt that burned inside her and tied her heart in knots. Her eyes were puffed out and her hair laid around her in tangles. She hadn't brushed it for the last week. Hadn't even thought about it. She ran the scene over and over in her head. Davey putting the vial in his mouth. She doing the same. The noise of cracking glass haunted her now. That tiny sound that shook her world and ended a life. Another tear escaped from her eye and rolled down her cheek, onto her pillow. She had given up wiping them away now. Something brought her out of her thoughts and back into the present. It was outside. That sound. She didn't move. Didn't look to see what it was. She didn't care. It didn't bother her whether it was burglars or murderers. But she knew it was probably just an animal. The redundant light bulb in the ceiling the focus of her gaze. A shadow moved across her face. There was somebody outside. As much as she didn't care. She was curious. She thought about sitting up and looking out of the window, but her energy deserted her, so instead she merely tilted her head so that she could see out. She expected to see nothing more than the tips of the bare trees, waving in the night air. But her heart stopped in her chest. She felt death for a split second as it rose up to her throat and stopped the air from entering her lungs. Davey stood at her window. His face pressed against the glass. Staring in at her. At first she just stared back. When she tried to scream, nothing came out. Panic raced through her body. She was breathing fast, making herself dizzy. How could this be? It can't be. It's a dream. It's a dream. She muttered between sharp breaths. Dream.Dream.Dream. She tried to lift herself from the bed, She would run and tell her parents, but her body would not obey orders. She sat, paralysed and

stared at her lover. Her dead lover. Her eyes flared open in fright. His face was ashen, of a slightly green hue and smothered with clods of wet earth. His black shirt torn from the shoulder revealing more ivory skin. His face was pressed right up against the glass. She knew that there should have been a small, white patch of moisture condensing on the pane in front of his mouth, but she saw none. Finally her body came to and all she could do was dive under the covers, like a scared child, pulling them tightly over her head. Rocking backwards and forwards. Dream.Dream.Dream. Eventually, exhausted, sleep took over her fragile body and she fell deeply.

"Mum, you need to believe me. I saw him"

Her mother had made her a full breakfast but it sat cold and untouched in front of her. She sat with her legs pulled up to her chest. Her mother at the opposite end of the table picking angrily at a sausage.

"No dear, you did not" her mother's voice was terse now, tears welling in the bottom of her already heavy eyes.

"I refuse to argue with you anymore. I have told you over and over again for a whole hour now." She stood up and walked over to the window. The day was grey and miserable

"You did not see him. It is impossible for you to have seen him. When will you get it into your head that Davey is dead?" The silence that followed her words, hung in the air like a scythe. The last words echoing around every empty corner of the room. Helena felt the rage boil within her. She had seen him. It was not a dream. But she had no way to prove it. She had already dragged her mother outside to look for footprints in the ground outside her room, but much to her frustration, there were none.

"I know what I saw mum and I don't care if you don't believe me," she was screaming back now. Her cheeks flushed with madness.

"He was at my window last night, staring in at me"

"No he was not" Helena's mother bellowed. She never raised her voice. Helena picked up the full cup of coffee that she had been staring at all morning and threw it at the floor.

"I know what I saw" she squealed, "He is not dead"

A single tear of desperation ran down her mother's worn face

"I'm calling the Doctor"

After more than an hour of struggling, the doctor had finally managed to hold Helena down and sedate her. Now she laid still, her eyes glossed over.

"You need to understand Mrs Thorn, that when a loved one is lost, the ones left behind can go through very deep mourning, which can sometimes lead to a breakdown or mental illness."

Helena's mother stood behind the sofa and looked down at her daughter.

"As far as I am aware Helena and Davey were very close. His death has affected her deeply, which puts her at a much higher risk of illness. Common symptoms can include mood swings, hallucinations and depression and although Helena has displayed many of these, it does not mean that she is ill".

He had suggested a higher than normal dose of sedatives to keep her calm during the next few days until she had come to terms with what had happened and deal with her emotions in a normal way.

"All I can suggest is that you leave her alone for a few days, make sure she gets enough to eat and comfort her. I'm very sorry for your loss" he left with a thin smile.

Helena was slumped on the old couch in the living room where her father normally sat to watch the television. It was worn and needed replacing but her father had insisted that they keep it because it fitted him perfectly. He had protested at first when the doctor had suggested the sofa instead of her bed. Just in case she had nightmares about seeing Davey at the window. But relented at the risk of seeming selfish. Now he sat in his room, down the hall, fiddling with the flimsy aerial on the old black and white TV, trying to catch the start of the football. Her mum was pulling on her coat in the hallway. She slipped on her old fashioned leather shoes and called down the corridor

"Ronald, I'm just nipping into town to pick up a few things that the doctor mentioned. Will you keep an eye on Helena?"

She received a grunt that sounded vaguely like a reply and pulled the front door shut behind her.

Helena could not see anything. She slipped in and out of consciousness. One minute she would be looking at the ceiling, the next she was in total darkness. Her thoughts like slippery fish. She couldn't quite grasp them. Just when she thought she might have one, it wriggled from her and swam away. She didn't feel angry or upset. She didn't feel anything. Her emotions did not exist as

she floated around this vacuum of darkness. So she didn't hear when the back door clicked open and somebody came in.

When the mists inside her head began to clear, Helena found herself in a dream. In this dream she was cold. Really cold. She could see the tops of empty trees and the full moon, big and bright behind them. She could hear the brittle leaves, rustling together in the gentle breeze. And she just lay there, in her white nightdress, looking up into the clear sky. The dream was vivid. She put it down to the drugs; She could feel the undergrowth scratching at the insides of her pale legs. She heard movement behind her. Her heart thumped hard, just once, sending adrenaline pumping through her body. She used all of her strength to lift herself up onto her elbow so that she could have a better view of this dream world. Slowly she eased herself into a sitting position. Her head throbbed with pain. She was in a forest of some kind. Trees in all direction, with no end in sight. She thought back to her childhood, playing in the woods behind her house. She crawled to her knees and looked behind her. Davey was leaning against a gnarled oak tree, smiling at her. A knife, shining in the moonlight, hung in his hand. Her heart jolted in her chest again. This is the time when I normally wake up, she told herself. This is the time when I jump awake and feel a flood of relief. When I get to say, "It was just a dream". But she remained, kneeling, her gown muddy and torn around the bottom, staring at her dead lover. She reached up a hand and began to pinch her arm violently. Drawing blood. Dream.Dream.Dream. A smile crept across Davey's face. He said nothing but started to limp slowly towards her. Menace thick in his eyes. The knife, blinding her, when it met with the moon. Helena scrambled to her feet and tried to run. Her body was still weak from the sedatives. She staggered away from the advancing corpse. Like a chase in slow motion, they moved through the trees. A week old body and a drugged young girl. Helena looked behind her constantly. Davey had his eyes locked on her like a predator. She sobbed and tried to will herself to run faster. Tried to make her legs move normally, but they felt like they were not her own. Her body felt like a dead weight. She collapsed behind a tree to regain some strength. Pressed against the bark, she tried to hold her breath and hoped that he wouldn't find her. He had been dead for more than a week. How could his brain still be working? She could hear the chilling sound of his grim limp. Sliiide, step. Sliiide, step. And then

silence. She tensed her body. Tried to be as still as possible hoping that he had given up his chase. Had lost her and gone back to the grave. The knife made a cracking sound as it smashed through the hard muscle of her rib cage and embedded itself in her heart. She stared down in unbelief, the dead hand still holding the knife. Blood gushed onto her virgin white gown in the darkness of the forest and made a large pool on the ground. Her mouth was frozen open in fear. As the last of her life escaped, she slumped against the tree. Davey pulled out the knife causing the blood to pump faster. His smirk had grown to a wide smile. He kissed her gently on the cheek and whispered into her dead ear "There is no escaping death" He took her by the arm and dragged her body away.

He laid her neatly into the coffin, built for two, where she should have joined him a week ago. Before he climbed in next to her he took a broken stick from the ground, and in dirt he scrawled on the gravestone, beneath his own name:

HELENA THORN

No one heard the coffin lid fall shut, on cemetery hill.



Bio: Abigail Lambton is a young horror writer from Nottingham, England. She has been writing in the horror genre for nearly four years now and is just about to start a degree in English and Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University. She takes a lot of her inspiration from her own little village and from bands such as Calabrese and Tiger Army.

Stumble Through the Dark

by Keaton Foster

As I stumble through the dark,
Evermore aware I become of the tragedy that is me.
The wicked wind blows across the vastness of this place.
It tears and shreds all it touches.
It tosses and turns the limbs of the wild oaks in the darkened meadows.
It stains their bark with its injustice and violent tendencies.
It has no sympathy for those it scars.
It shows no pity.
The darkness advances at a frightening pace.
The utter lack of light that surrounds me is overwhelming.
The absence of colorful words like I love you seems obscene.
I am simply a man lost.
I am stumbling through the darkness that has become my existence.
I have no sunny tomorrows in my future.
I have no golden fields of eternal light.
I have no one, nor shall I ever.
For I am alone in the most serious of ways.
There shall be no heaven for me.
No God has come to my rescue.
No savior has bestowed his grace.
There is no devil in this tale.
For even I am too lost for his taste.
There is no hope in any form I can relate.
There is no sign of love, comparatively speaking.
For that is a feeling I have yet to receive.
There is only the true me left here to stumble through the dark.
To find my way in the madness of this place.
To find my way through the madness it creates.
I have no light, no skills, or teachings to guide my way.
All I have is my experience with the darkness to point the way.
I have been here before.
I have been here all along.
I have never left since my creation.
I know all the curves of the path.
I know all the bumps that lay before me.
This is an oh so familiar place.
So, excuse me if you will as I stumble about in familiarity.
This place called darkness is merely home to me.

BIO: For Keaton Foster writing is not only a hobby or something he does in hopes of fame or fortune. Writing is and will always be a way of life, something he must do. He lives to create writings that go beyond conventionality, far beyond the normal whatever that is. Piercing deep into the heart of what it means to be alive, to be human. "We owe it to ourselves to question all that climbs to the sky and falls at our feet" (Keaton Foster, 2008). Enjoy your trip through the world that will be painted, the questions that will be raised, and the emotions that will be conveyed within my words. Visit Keaton Foster's Websites: <http://www.beyondthedarknesscreativewritings.net> and <http://keatonfoster.Writing.Com>

CONSEQUENCE OF TAKING TOO MUCH

by Richard H. Fay

Red rose
placed on fresh earth
becomes a grave symbol
of true love lost and my hunger
for blood.

BIO: A former laboratory technician turned home educator, Richard H. Fay now spends his days juggling various writing and art projects. He resides in Upstate New York with his wife, daughter, two cats, and a rather confused shepherd-chow mix. Legends, myths, folklore, and history all serve as inspiration for Richard's creative endeavours. He has illustrated his own poetic creations as well as the works of other writers and poets. His illustrations have appeared on-line and in-print in FLASHING SWORDS, ABANDONED TOWERS, THE WILLOWS, and other publications. More examples of his prose, poetry, and artwork can be seen at his web site, Azure Lion Productions: <http://azurelionproductions.com>

The Immortal Voice

by Emmanuel Paige

The immortal voice forever speaking
Etched upon the page as if in stone
Whether simple message or hidden meaning
The truth is not but dusty bones

To leave a thought or idea behind
Seems to be man's eternal quest
How they struggle even unto the end of time
A futile and vain attempt at best

But when the voice is strong and true
It speaks across the centuries
A glimpse of the past for the present to peruse
One of life's greatest mysteries

As if the speaker who has long deceased
Has traveled through voids of space and time
Words like quasars from tongues released
Quoting verse from some forgotten rhyme

DAILY DRAMA

by Alex Moisi

“BEHAVE, YOU MONSTER!”

Seconds ago, my son declared war on a box of Corn Flakes and began throwing its contents around our shopping cart in a cheerful manner. I grab the box and try to replace it on the shelf without causing a scene. A prompt scream followed by a river of tears ruin my attempts.

Two concerned mothers nearby turn towards me, their angelic kids in tow. I try to make a quick escape and accidentally slam into a shelf. As boxes of cereal rain around us my son grins ear to ear.

I eventually bribe him with candy so he'll shut up and I can finish shopping. Later, as I stop and clean his puke from the backseat of the mini-van, I remember when grocery shopping used to take only an hour. Even later, in the driveway, I realize the steaks we were planning to have for dinner are ripped apart and lying under my seat; a three-hour trip for nothing.

“Marla, watch Danny,” I cry to my wife, entering the house “I’ve got to go back and get another steak.”

All I hear in response is a high-pitched scream from Susan, our four-year-old daughter. She runs toward me and stabs my knee with a plastic fork. The joy in her eyes is contagious, and Danny giggles clapping his hands. My wife, sweaty and tired, enters the room as I curse angrily.

“Honey, not in front of the kids,” she sighs.

“I think they do it on purpose,” I mutter.

“You didn't get the steaks?” she asks while Danny wobbles past us towards the backyard. “What are we having for dinner? I already started the grill.”

“Well, Danny ruined them. I'll just run and—”

My wife cuts me off. “No, honey, I'll go.”

“But, Marla, it's not my fault,” I try to protest.

“Honey, your little miss decided to shit in the bathtub today. I've been cleaning four-year-old crap all morning while you were out. I think I deserve some fresh air.” Her tone is final, and I nod, mumbling.

As the mini-van backs out the driveway, I hear Danny screaming from somewhere outside. I hope he burned himself on the grill; maybe he'll learn a lesson. Susan, laughing like a little imp, sprints towards the backyard. More screams and the sound of something breaking fol-

low.

Marla waves to me from the car with a sadistic grin on her face. I bet she'll take her time shopping. With a small puff of exhaust gas, she's gone and all I can see are rows of white, one-story houses, just like ours. I almost expect another prematurely balding dad to signal desperately towards me from the window across the street. But across the street lives a happy, newly-married couple. We live so close, yet I can only dream about their peaceful oasis of sanity. Another scream jolts me back to reality, and I head towards the backyard deck.

I notice their little trap too late. Danny's marbles are spread all over the floor and Susan has spilled a bottle of water on the smooth cement. As I loose balance and slip towards the hot grill I hear them giggle, and darkness soon follows.

* * *

“Darling, I'm back. I found a great deal on . . .”

I walk in to greet Marla and she stares at me, surprised.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yes. Oh, don't worry about this,” I say shaking my burnt hand. “I made dinner. It was a mess; the kids gave me a heck of a time,” I finish, laughing.

As I lead Marla to the kitchen I sneak a kiss on her cheek and she smiles, confused. A plate full of meat fills the room with a delicious smell.

“Do you want a piece? It's well done, just how you like it,” I say, grabbing two dinner plates. “You should try some. After a good dinner you just feel like there's not a trouble in the world.”

“Honey, where are the kids?” my wife asks, hesitantly accepting a plate.

“Well, the funny thing is they really helped me with this. They pushed me, in more than one way,” I joke, nibbling on a crunchy piece of ear. “Sit down and have some. It tastes better than you'd think.”



RESURRECTION MARY: A FADING LEGEND

by Jeff Woodward

Resurrection Mary, Chicago's most famous spectre, has had a dying off, if you will, over the past 20 years. Though there have been some occasional sightings in the last decade or so, the most recent sighting dates to 2001, by a young couple travelling northbound on Archer Avenue through the town of Justice, Illinois, in the vicinity of Resurrection Cemetery. They claim to have seen a young woman dressed in a white evening gown, walking northbound on Archer Avenue. Curiosity grabbing hold of them, they turned around after driving some blocks up the road, and heading back the way they came from. To their surprise, the woman in white was no longer to be seen. After the frightful experience, the young man

and woman both swore off driving down Archer Avenue for the rest of their lives.

Was it Resurrection Mary that they report to have seen? Or perhaps it was their sub consciousness beaming the image of a ghost onto that of an everyday flesh and blood woman, who just happened to be walking down the road at the exact same time? To decide, let us take a walk through history, into the story of Resurrection Mary, the O'Henry Ballroom, and the myth itself.

The O'Henry Ballroom, now called the Willowbrook Ballroom, is located at 8900 Archer Avenue, in Willow Springs Illinois. At the time of Resurrection Mary's death, O'Henry's was one of the top ballrooms in the United





States, drawing anywhere of up to ten thousand people a week to use its dance floor. Over the years, the ballroom has had its ups and downs, as the fad of ballroom dancing ceased to draw in the numbers they had in the 1930s and 1940s. The sightings of the apparition were at their peak between the 1940s and 1970s.

According to legend, in the 1930s, a young woman, who was dancing at the O'Henry Ballroom, became entangled in an argument with her boyfriend. Frustrated, she left the ballroom, and proceeded to hitchhike north on Archer Avenue. It was then that she was suddenly struck and killed, the driver of the vehicle not stopping. There has been speculation over the years on who the young woman actually was, and her identity is still a subject of debate among researchers. The crime remained unsolved, and the appearances of a woman in white, hitchhiking along Archer Avenue, from the vicinity of the O'Henry Ballroom in Willow Springs, to Resurrection Cemetery in Justice, Illinois, about 5 miles north,

became more commonplace.

The sightings of Mary vary from person to person. During one account, a man claimed to have picked up a young woman, aged around twenty, dressed in a white dress, and drove her to a local bar, located just south of Resurrection Cemetery, on the east side of the street. There, he danced one song with her, and she disappeared before his and the other bar patrons eyes. During another account, a taxi driver picked up a young woman on a cold winters morning, wearing only a "fancy" dress, as he put it. The supposed ghost had the taxi driver drive her down Archer Avenue. When they pulled up in front of a shack-type dwelling, the woman yelled, "Stop here, stop here!" which the taxi driver did. He looked over at the shack, and was about to ask the young woman a question. When he glanced back at the woman, she had vanished. Or so the story goes.

The 1990s and into the new millennium brought a decrease in the apparition's sightings. As the southwest



suburbs of Chicago began to build up during the housing boom of the late 90s to the present day, traffic has increased substantially along Archer Avenue, from Route 83 to Route 45. With the increase of commuters, one would assume that the sightings of Chicago's Most Famous Ghost would have skyrocketed, when in fact, they declined. There has only been one reported sighting since 2001, in contrast to the tens of sightings that have occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Could it be that the spirit of Mary was only seen by those who knew of her story, and unconsciously hoped to catch a glimpse of the apparition, hence causing it to become a reality? Or, quite possibly, Mary's killer has passed away, causing her to find her peace on earth, and to finally be accepted into the world of the dead.



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The Ghost Painter

by Lawrence R. Dagstine

IT WAS THE RIGHT SUMMER DAY for the wrong kind of romantic encounter.

The tables outside Rockefeller Center were not all filled; it was still too early, and thirty-five year old Olivia Maynard sat alone at one of them, gazing around her at the bright scene. The fountains splashed high in frothy plumes, the tulips and daffodils planted around the birches made an explosion of color, and over her head the green leaves of the trees moved gently in the soft air, their shifting light dappling her hair and shoulders.

Window shoppers strolled back and forth among the boulevard of stores, and it had a remote, muted quality about it. It was hard to believe that Fifth Avenue was only a few yards away, screeching and blasting and rumbling with the traffic of buses and cars, and that the sidewalks were congested with crowds of tourists and hurrying people.

Picking at her salad, Olivia glanced around restlessly. And then her head stilled. A young boy and girl, obviously in love, were wandering together below the concourse, their arms around each other's waist, their sides pressed together as if they had coalesced into one smooth unit. Olivia instantly projected herself into the girl, imagining what she was feeling at this very moment. How quickly it all came back to her memory: the fevered heart, the soft excitement, the pleasure of youth, the joy because the boy was right, the moment was right, with everything crystalized and shining and perfect. How long had it been since she felt like that? Had all the excitement drained out of her life in her mid-thirties?

She stared down at her plate, suddenly shamed by her thoughts. Her heart sunk deep inside her chest. Her whole body stiffened with some untitled protest, all of her crying out wordlessly for something relevant in her life, something glimmering and beckoning in the distance, something far removed from the day-to-day isolation and dullness. She would get a feeling of panic thinking about it, as if a pillow was suddenly pressed tightly against her face and she was smothering, slowly dying before she had lived.

Sitting there, she felt a throb of that panic now. The sight of the young couple in love, the rounded perfec-

tion of the summer day, had it all going mysteriously in her mind again. Opening her purse, she took out her hand mirror and gazed at her reflection. It calmed her at once. Her face looked quite lovely, wrinkle-free and fresh enough. Her auburn hair, catching the flashes of sunlight from the moving leaves above, glinted brown with gold. She replaced the mirror and picked up her fork again.

Suddenly, a male voice at her side said: "Do you mind if I join you?"

Her head turned quickly. A young man stood there, carrying his tray of food. He was looking down at her and smiling.

"Of course not," she said. It was, after all, an overcrowded café with very little outdoor seating, and he seemed well-groomed and normal enough.

He sat down and began removing the dishes from his tray to the table. She pushed some food around on her plate with her fork. She wanted to turn her head again and look at him, but of course she couldn't; her lowered gaze fastened instead on her hands. They were beautiful and strong, tanned from the sun, the fingers long and blunt-tipped. His fingernails, too, were buffed to a soft polish.

"How perfect everything is today," he said. And as she looked up at him, he gestured toward the fountains and flowers with his free hand.

"Yes, it's very beautiful," she said. "Manhattan's breathtaking this time of year." He had a deep, almost creasing voice, she thought. What a fascinating face he had, too. Very young, and yet old, somehow.

They began to talk. It was one of the nice things about New York City and outdoor restaurants. There was nothing wrong with striking up a conversation with the person who joined you at the table. It was easy and natural. And like meeting people on a train, knowing they would never see each other again, there were sometimes revelations not disclosed even to a friend. She was very conscious of the stranger's beautiful voice as he spoke, and of his face. It was thin, almost gaunt. His blue eyes affected her most; they were so startlingly direct, as if they were touching her everywhere without moving from her own. She began to feel flushed and marvelously alive.

They talked about the Center, about the shows out in the Broadway theaters, about the current MOMA exhibit—all of these things within walking distance. He was, he admitted, a pushover for shows based on female characters. “Evita,” he said, “is quite a production. She gave up a blossoming stage and radio career to go after a political office in which she truly believed she could make a difference.” He laughed and shook his head. “They should have called her the ‘Savior of an Entire Country’ instead of the ‘Spiritual Leader of a Nation’.”

“You sound admiring,” she said, finding the small talk venerable and stimulating.

“Well, I am. I like honest people who know what they want and go straight after it. They fascinate me, and I don’t exclude women.”

“It’s good you didn’t live in the Age of Innocence, then,” she said. “The women went after men, all right, but it wasn’t so innocent. They took devious ways; they kept fainting all over the place.” There was a liquid shine in her eyes; her head was slightly tilted. “You would have left them lying right there on the floor.”

“Hah! Without a qualm.” He picked up his fork and looked down at his plate. “I doubt,” he said, “if this is going to be a great dining experience.” He gazed at her again. “Are you a good cook?”

“Please,” she laughed. “I burn TV dinners. And that’s not easy.”

He was staring at her with his lifted fork stilled in his hand. Abruptly, without warning, he said: “There’s a wonderful radiance about you.”

She felt a soft thump in the center of her chest. Above her head, the feathery leaves moved gently, sending shifting lights and shadows over his face. She could not look away. Something is happening, she thought.

Finally, she said, “Thank you. Are you a good cook?”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I love good food. I love all the good things in life.” His tone was dry. “I mean to get them, too.”

“Oh, you will. You’re so young.” Thirty, she thought; I hope he says thirty.

He gave her a long, level glance. Then he said: “Twenty-eight. Why? Do I look like that much of a growing boy to you?” He gave a playful sneer.

Only seven years apart; she felt a sudden pang.

Again she had a sense of titillation. It was amazing how he could make that man-woman contact in a moment; it was as basic, as uncomplicated, as a quick thrust

of an electrical plug into a socket, instantly turning on the current. But it was shocking, too. She must say something now, something that would reflect an amusement at his confidence, the kind of “now-now-I’m-a-good-girl-around-people-I-don’t-know” remark that would let him know that she didn’t let strange men look and talk to her like that.

But as she opened her mouth to say the words, they stopped in her throat. Some instinct told her that they would be a mistake, dull her shine in his eyes, reduce her in his mind to just another ordinary, conventional woman. He probably expected something far different from her.

She said slowly, staring into his face: “No. You look like a man.”

He didn’t say anything. Again they sat looking at each other as the seconds went by. This is crazy, Olivia thought, this can’t be happening—not this fast. It’s as if we were in bed together this morning and he’s doing marvelous things to me. And I’m letting him do them.

Abruptly, he said, “I don’t seem to be getting much eating done. You’re a very distracting female.” He began buttering a piece of his roll. “Do you live in the city?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, relieved that he had begun to eat, that he wasn’t looking at her. “About seven blocks from here.” Finally, she could breathe again.

“I’m even closer than that,” he said. “I live practically around the corner on 49th Street.”

“Really? Are there apartments there?” She always remembered the area as being commercial.

“Art studios. I rent out one of the galleries over the restaurants. Top floor.” He shook his head. “It’s an off-beat place but it has its charms. I sublet it from a curator friend. Oh, I’m Oscar, by the way. Oscar Harris.” He finally extended a hand.

“You’re an artist?” She was impressed. “I’m Olivia Maynard. I work in advertising.”

“I’m a painter. I have murals all over my walls.” He glanced up at her. “Come up and see my murals?”

“Um, well, I’m not sure . . . But what do you paint?”

“Ghosts, the afterlife, the beauty of the supernatural. Dark and brooding, yes, but with some watercolor and expressionism I give it new meaning and substance.” He was eating again, his gaze lowered to his plate. “You might as well tell me you don’t go home with strangers. I saw your face.”

She was startled but felt bad. “Doesn’t my being cau-

tious mean something to you?"

"About as much as your green eyes. It would never get in my way."

She sat motionless, watching him eat. Then she said slowly: "As a painter, I don't imagine you ever let much of anything get in your way. You just put it all there on the canvas for the world to see."

There was a brief moment of silence. "Actually, I consider my work to be one of my most private aspects." He put down his fork and pushed his plate away. "Shall we take a walk?"

"A walk?"

"Around Fifth Avenue. I still have some time before I have to get back to my latest piece."

Staring at his profile, determining whether he was to be trusted or not, she had an impression of compressed energy that was almost frightening. He has a tremendous drive and ambition, she thought; creative, too. He's going to get up there to the top, come hell or high water, like the rest of them? Warhol, Basquait, Pollack, Greenberg and Rosenberg. She could tell.

Finally, he looked down at his watch and said that he had to leave. As they walked from Rockefeller Plaza, he told her that he didn't usually have lunch in cafes or outdoor restaurants unless it was business. "I have it in my studio," he said. "It's cheap, close to the museum and art foundations, and the food and scenery is better." They had passed Saks Fifth Avenue's windows when he turned to her. "Will you come up soon and have lunch with me?"

"And have hot horny sex?" his eyes said.

The message, as clear as if it were written there, wrenched her back to reality.

She said, "I don't usually eat lunches. Not real ones, that is. Just something light and exotic." She cleared her throat. "Like a fruit salad and a Diet Coke."

He laughed. "You're marvelous," he said. "I must see you again."

"I usually don't date?" she began.

He broke in: "Your dating life doesn't interest me. You do." He fished for a piece of paper in his pocket, placed it against a wall, and wrote something on it. Handing it to her, he said, "Here's my address and phone number. I paint full-time, so you can call me any day around noon. I'll be there, palette in hand." His smile came again. Then his eyes went slowly down to her mouth, lingered there, and rose just as slowly to meet hers.

A sudden weakness came over her. She put the piece of paper in her purse. "In that case," she said, making her voice light, "put me down for every day next week. Lunch is on me."

He laughed again. Then he turned away and was gone through the glass door. But even his shoulders, she thought, carried a line of mystery.

* * *

Lunch with Oscar left a dazzle behind her eyes, as if she had gazed too long at the sun and now, turning away, saw all the ordinary shapes and objects in her life through a grayish blur. A fantasy would flare up in her mind and burn there steadily; her feelings of melancholy and loneliness had miraculously disintegrated into the air.

What happened after that varied in recurrent dreams. Everything her and Oscar did in her imagination? standing, sitting, lying naked together in his bed? invariably affected her breathing. Sometimes, staring down unseeingly at a book in her lap, the sensuous pictures in her mind would become so vivid and exciting that looking up finally, she would feel an actual shock to her senses. The dream would recede then and reality would crowd back. A great part of her, during the past three years, had remained empty as a darkened theater that cried out for the lights, the music, the applause to start again. It was as if she had mislaid a part of herself and could not find it.

But far back in the dark recesses of her mind was the growing certainty that she was going to make that telephone call, and when noon came the following Tuesday, it was almost with relief that she picked up the receiver and dialed the number she had long since memorized.

There was a ringing at first, then a click. "Hello?"

"Oscar?" She could hear her heart pounding. Surely, he could hear it.

"Yes?"

"This is Olivia Maynard. We met at Rockefeller Center last week."

"Oh, hi Olivia. Would you like to come for lunch?"

"Yes, I would."

"Great. How soon?"

"How's half-an-hour sound?"

"Sounds good. I'll see you then." A click.

She hung up. How direct he was. And she had responded the same way. Her head was lifted and there were two little spots of color in her cheeks. You know

what's going to happen when you get there, she thought. He made it quite plain. When you said, "Yes," just now, you said "Yes" to everything.

Well, it was what she had wanted, wasn't it?

As she turned away, she already knew the answer. She wanted it more than anything in such a very long time. She had constantly been in disagreement with herself and her decisions in life.

Walking up 49th street and Madison Avenue, she did agree on one thing: it was a foolish place to live, the entrance tucked away between two foreign restaurants, his three rooms at the very top of the building. It didn't look like that much of an artist's studio. The wooden floorboards of his small living room were old and uneven, the furniture nondescript, left by its former tenant, along with four dark and majestic panels of rather scary-looking imagery which dominated the room. Ghosts of young females and grave markers in acrylic; personified visions of heaven and hell in oil; disembodied souls and unspeakable wraiths in watercolor; stuff of that nature. They looked so real; it made her shiver a little. Yet the neat piles of art books and fancy brushes and colorful paint tubes, tipped off with the red and brown scatter rugs and the jazzy music from the old-fashioned stereo, imbued the room with cheerfulness.

From the apartment below came the barking of excited dogs; rain splattered against the windowpanes. A small table was set for two in a corner, but he made no move toward the kitchen in back nor did she want him to. They both sat on the futon, partly turned to each other, laid out with their shoulders against the wall. They had said very little.

He finally asked her, "Are you sure you don't want a drink?"

"No, thank you." Olivia was still mystified by his artwork.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head mutely, fearful that an audible answer would lead to more words, even a conversation about something, and she didn't want that.

"Neither am I."

But he made no move toward her; he just lay there, half-turned, looking at her with the strange smile on his thin, attractive face, his eyes doing their not-so-innocent little dance.

Finally he stirred, sinking down beside her; he buried his face in the hollow of her throat, his lips brushing

lightly over her skin, moving up to the lobe of her ear. The smell of his skin, his hair, and his breath made her dizzy. "Olivia," he whispered, and he began kissing her slowly, again and again, his mouth opening in hunger until hers was opened, too; their tongues touched and she felt a light throbbing go through her whole body, as if she was quivering. His hands became gentle on her back; she heard the whine of her zipper going down, felt his fingers unhooking her bra, but she made no protest. There was only a wild flutter inside her as she became conscious of her dress being pulled over her shoulders, of her breasts being released to the air, full and free. His head went down between them, his voice became muffled. "How wonderfully delicious you are," he was saying, his tongue doing things that made her heart stop in her chest and then pound again. "You're like a ripe fruit; I want to eat you." One of his hands reached up for her hand, guided it down his body where his swollen lump bulged and convulsed under the tight denim that housed it.

"See what you're doing to me," he whispered. "See how I want you. Do you want me, too?"

"Yes," she muttered, her eyes half-open with ecstasy. She stared at the murals through tiny slits as he nuzzled her. "Yes, I want you." Lying there, it seemed to her that she had entered a mystical new world of sensuality and excitement; it also seemed the ghostlike images in the paintings were watching her.

As fresh gusts of afternoon rain splashed against the windows in the shadowed room there was only the sound of their murmurs, the eclipsed whispers: "Oh, yes, I adore that. Don't stop what you're doing."

"I won't. What a beautiful body you have, Olivia. It's a work of art. You're so lovely here . . . and here . . . and especially here."

"That's wonderful. That's thrilling. God, I'm so terribly horny. Please, please?"

"Not yet, take it easy. Yes?ahhh, yes, love, that's marvelous. Hold it there, just like that. That's heaven." A groan of pleasure. "Oh, fuck yeah."

She never wanted to leave the world she was in, never wanted him to stop. Voluptuous shimmers of delight rose inside her in rhythmic waves that began lapping higher and higher, up, up and beyond reason, beyond bearing, suddenly, scaldingly, until her body shook with them and she finally cried out, begging for release.

When it was all over, she fell back and said, "You are amazing. I must be the first woman you've had up here

who didn't get creeped out."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Doing it around these paintings," she said. "No offense, but your artwork is rather gloomy. I'm sure there are other girls who've told you no because of their being out in the open."

"Actually, the spirits in my murals are all female. All the women I have ever had up here modeled for me. They offered to be a part of them."

"How so?" she asked.

"They wanted to know what it was like to be a real ghost." He held a paintbrush up for her to see. "My physique isn't the only thing which can work magic."

She laughed. "So you're saying if I wanted to know what it felt like to be a ghost in one of your portraits, all I would have to do is model for you?"

He smiled wickedly at her. "I find that inspiration comes from some of the most peculiar places. Why? Would you like to be a part of one of my masterpieces?"

Silence. She didn't want to make too much smart conversation, and she could tell that he didn't want to, either. Laying there, facing him without touching his naked frame, she began to feel as if she were lagging behind her own breath and trying to catch up to it.

He finally opened up a little more and said, "Model for me. Let me introduce you to my world. Let's explore the realm of my paintings, my work."

She laughed once more. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say the only reason you go to area restaurants is to pick up art subjects."

He didn't respond to her remark. However, she noticed how hard he squeezed the brush's wooden handle, almost to the point of breaking.

"All right," she went on buoyantly. "Make me a ghost!" She giggled. "Make me a part of that painting over there,"—her finger was outstretched and pointing at one of the unfinished murals on the far wall—"so long as we get to stay together forever."

But by the time she had agreed he was already in the back room of the apartment, taking out the necessary tools from a storage chest.

She got up and went to the bathroom. "Should I get dressed?" she called out.

"No. Stay the way you are," he hollered back from the corridor.

Washing her hands in the sink and fixing her hair in the mirror, she said, "Is there a particular spot you want

me, a position or pose you require, my love?"

There was no answer.

She went back into the living room and stared at the black and gray scenery rushing past her eyes in the nearest panel. If walls could talk, she thought, these paintings hanging on them would have much to say. Each small stroke was like a symphony to her ears, only the kind of music made for funerals. Perhaps it was because of his touch, to canvas or to flesh, light as if it was, that made her blood go heavy with longing; she barely knew him, yet she wanted more of him. The dreariness of the scene suddenly seemed to mock her. On one side, there were female souls plunged into woods. On the other, strokes of acrylic sunlight stabbed through illustrated treetops, glinting yellow and orange fitfully here and there above the curled bones and straggling corpses that covered most of the piece. The atmosphere surrounding its stillness was as hushed and mystical as the inside of a dark cathedral. In deeper shades, it almost weaved a narrow path through the underworld and away from the plane of the living.

Finally, she looked up and noticed an unfinished area. "What do you plan to paint here?" she asked, putting her finger on the colorless spot.

He let out his breath sharply; he was directly behind her. "You," he said, putting his arms around her shoulders and startling her. "I'll give it texture." He kissed the back of her neck. "My God, the contrast of the texture of your skin against this painting. It'll be magnificent." He was practically drooling over her.

I'm beautiful to him at this moment, she thought. I'm probably the most attractive woman he's ever been with!

She suddenly felt wonderful, as if it were the happiest moment in a single woman's life.

She whispered, "Aren't you going to let go of me? You know, so you can paint me?"

"That's not how it works," he said, taking a blunt object to the back of her head.

She hit the floor with a loud and nasty thump. An endless stream of blood poured out of her skull. She rolled her eyes upward in pain to the naked figure standing over her. He was holding a mallet in one hand and a piece of twisted piano wire in the other.

"I'm sorry, Olivia," he said, dropping the mallet and taking the wire between both his hands. "Blood, sweat, and tears go into my work. Therefore I expect only the same to come out of it. You were about right when you said I was the kind of man who goes fishing for art sub-

jects at outdoor restaurants. You overlooked one thing though: in order to be a ghost, immortalized in one of my pieces, I have to turn you into one first. And this is the only way to do it.”

He knelt down and wrapped the piano wire around her neck and finished what he started. She didn't like the sharp edge very much, but when it came to his art she knew he meant it as a compliment. He loved her aggressiveness in bed, he admired her courage in coming to him the way she did?risking her life, risking her reputation, everything that represented safety and security?just for the short hours they spent together. “You're the kind of woman,” he told her as she bled to death in front of him, “who can take life by the throat and throttle it until it coughs up what you want. You're tough. You've got real guts. If anybody deserves to be a part of my masterpiece, it's you.”

Looking down at her own body in incorporeal form, Olivia was certain without doubt that he cared about her, almost as certain that he would have dated her if his hands weren't so deadly. His face from the canvas, with all the features magnified, seemed to swim toward her ethereal vision like a pale disk, then recede again.

He picked up his magic brush and trapped the essence of her spirit, and when he did, he made sure that it hung motionless among the mural's vast colorful scheme. No man before or since had ever made her soul come alive as he had. Why, he could look at her across the room now whenever he wanted. And there she would be, all that was left of her blank and vacant, as if she were waiting for this painted nightmare to go away.



Bio: Lawrence Dagstine is a prolific writer of short fiction since 1996; he also writes non-fiction. He has well over 330+ fiction stories published or forthcoming in print magazines, news periodicals, webzines, anthologies, and other media. Sam's Dot Publishing is releasing his first short story collection in 2009, and he is the author of a western novel, called *Allegiance to Arms*. Some of his credits include: *Aoife's Kiss*, *Atomjack*, *Black Ink Horror*, *Beyond Centauri*, *Down in the Cellar*, *The Fifth Di*, *The Martian Wave*, *OG's Speculative Fiction*, *Jupiter SF*, *Nova SF*, *Sinister Tales*, *Mount Zion Speculative Fiction Review*, *Tales of the Talisman*, *Whispering Spirits*, *Whispers of Wickedness*, *The Willows*, *Written Word Online Magazine*, *The Sword Review*, *Escape Velocity*, *Midnight in Hell*, *The Ashen Eye*, *Worlds of Wonder*, *Pol-luto: The Anti-Pop Culture Journal*, and more just like it.

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CREATURE FEATURE

by Ricardo Delgado

*Ricardo Delgado is a film and comic book artist that has worked on such films as The Incredibles, Men in Black and Apollo 13.

He is the author of the Age of Reptiles comic book series, as well as one of the Production Designers of Disney's Atlantis-The Lost Empire. Delgado is of Costa Rican descent and lives in Los Angeles, California.

*Wikipedia.org



"Devil's Reef"



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A SIMPLE TASK

by Amanda Lawrence Auverigne

RACHEL RUSHED INTO THE KITCHEN. She moved to the marble table that lay in the center of the room and she placed an empty silver tray atop the food filled slab. She glanced up at a swinging wooden door that lay a few feet across from her and she heard the sound of laughter and soft music fill the room.

She turned from the doorway and she focused her attention on the food filled table in front of her. She grabbed a large circular glass platter that was filled with an assortment of fruit and cheeses and she lifted the heavy object in her hands. She turned to the swinging doors near her and she stopped when she heard a low creaking sound behind her.

She held tightly to the tray in her hands and she turned around. She saw a tall blonde haired man standing in front of a small wooden doorway in the far corner of the kitchen.

The handsome man closed the door behind him and he turned to his wife with a smile. He held a large bottle of wine in his left hand and lifted the glass container with a laugh.

"I got the wine." Randal said.

"Randal, you were supposed to bring that out twenty minutes ago. I'm already serving the cheese and fruit. And you can't have a wine party with just cheese and fruit. Oh, never mind. Let's see what you got." Rachel said.

"I'm sorry, Rachel. I guess I just lost track of time. That wine cellar down there is killer. I mean, it's so cool." Randal said.

"You brought red. Well, I guess that it will just have to do. Bring it in the living room will you? The guests are waiting." Rachel said.

"But, Rachel. I didn't tell you about the best part of the cellar." Randal said.

"Randal, I know all about the cellar. It's one of the reasons why we bought this place remember? For some reason, the previous owners left most of the old booze and our liquor cabinets have been pretty well stocked ever since." Rachel said.

"Yeah, but I squeezed behind the wine racks after I heard this noise and..." Randal began.

"Look, Randal. I really have to go in there and attend to the guests. And you should have brought up more than one bottle of wine. We have a lot of guests tonight. Honestly, where is that brain of yours?" Rachel said.

"But, Rachel. Just listen to me for a sec." Randal said.

"Can't. I have to go and see to the guests. Just hand me the bottle of wine if you're too chicken to go in." Rachel said.

"I am not chicken. And you can't carry that tray of food and the bottle of wine too. You're bound to drop something. You and I both know how clumsy you can be when you put yourself under unnecessary pressure." Randal said.

"Unnecessary pressure? Look, just give me the bottle so I can entertain our guests. Since you obviously don't care about this party or how much it means to me. Honestly, Randal. If we are bad hosts the chances of us being invited to our friends' parties are nil. And I don't want to be stuck sitting across the kitchen table from you every Friday night forcing myself to make conversation. I want to go out and socialize with other couples. Not just with you. And I won't let you ruin this for me. Now give me the wine." Rachel said.

"Okay, here." Randal said.

Randal took a step forward and he thrust the bottle of wine in Rachel's direction.

Rachel balanced the large glass tray in one hand and she snatched the bottle from her husband with a huff.

"Now, was that so damned hard?" Rachel asked.

"You don't have to use profanity when you talk to me, Rachel. I get frustrated with you too but I always manage to be respectful." Randal said.

"Look, the music in there isn't loud enough for us to have a fight that they won't be able to hear. And I won't let you embarrass me like that. No how, no way. Those are my friends in there. Not your geeky horror reading wanna be hacker friends. The people in our house tonight are important." Rachel said.

"So you're saying my friends aren't important?" Randal demanded.

"They're important to you. And keep your voice down. I don't want them to hear you whining. Its bad enough

I have to hear it all day long. Huh, I hate the fact that you're off during the summer and that I work from home and have to deal with you all the time. It's more than I can stomach." Rachel said.

"So what are you saying? You're saying that you want me to take a job that requires a year round commitment?" Randal asked.

"No, I'm asking you. No, I'm telling you to just give me some space!" Rachel yelled.

"I think they might have heard that." Randal said.

"Oh, just shut up Randal. And try to stay out of my way. And out of my guests' way." Rachel said.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to do anything to embarrass you, Rachel. Or your guests." Randal said.

"Just shut up and stay out of my way." Rachel said.

Rachel turned away from her husband and she moved towards the swinging door. She held the bottle of wine against her bosom as she struggled to carry the weighted tray in her other hand as she walked across the kitchen.

"Oh, Rachel?" Randal asked.

Rachel stopped in front of the door with a sigh.

"What is it, Randal?" she asked.

"I just wanted to tell you that I found something cool in the basement." Randal said.

"Cool like money? Cause we need it with the pay cut the district made you educators take last term." Rachel said.

"No, I found a ghou! in the basement." Randal said.

Rachel turned around and she looked at her husband with narrowed eyes.

"You found a what?" Rachel asked.

"A ghoul." Randal said.

Randal raised his hand and stepped to the side of the small kitchen.

Rachel saw a shiny silver chain clutched in her husband's hand and she followed the length of the long dangling chain with her eyes. She looked at the floor near her husband's feet and she saw a small gray creature crouching atop the floor.

The ash colored creature was bald and hundreds of dark circular bruises marred its gray flesh. A dingy rag covered the lower portion of its emaciated body and the thin silver chain was wrapped around its neck.

The animal clutched at Randal's legs with its thin hands and the creature pressed the side of its egg shaped head against the blonde man's legs. The small beast stared up at Rachel with a pair of liquid black eyes and a low mewl-

ing sound poured from its mouth. The animal snapped its jaw shut with the sound of a loud click and it let out a low whining sound before it drew back its lips to reveal a set of ragged yellow teeth.

Randal held the length of the thing's thin metal chain in his hands. He lowered one of his hands from the shiny silver chain and he patted the creature's skull with his palm.

The ash colored beast let out loud chirping sounds before it fell atop on its spine.

Rachel dropped the tray and wine with a gasp. She raised a hand to her lips and she took a slow step backwards.

"Rachel, that was a rare vintage. And I really wanted to taste some of that cheese. How much did you say it was for a pound again?" Randal asked.

"What is that thing?" Rachel asked.

"Like I said, it's a ghoul. I found him cowering behind the wine rack. Looks like he's been there a long time too. You can see his ribs if you really look. And anyway, he's really docile. I just shook this chain here and he came right up to me. He was so grateful I thought he would hump my leg for a minute. But he just sorta hugged me. It was kinda cute." Randal said.

"Get that thing out of my kitchen! And get it out of my house!" Rachel shouted.

"I pay the mortgage and I say he stays." Randal said.

"You're crazy just like they said you were." Rachel said.

"Who? Your parents or your friends?" Randal asked.

"I'm not staying here if you're going to keep that thing!" Rachel shouted.

"Shhh. Or your important friends will hear you. And besides, he's harmless." Randal said.

"What do you mean harmless? Just look at it!" Rachel yelled.

The creature let out a low cooing noise before it jumped off of the floor and hid behind Randal's legs.

Randal reached behind him and he patted the creature's head.

"You need to calm down. You're scaring him." Randal said softly.

"I'm scaring him? What about me? I'm scared! I'm scared out of my mind and you care more about this thing than you do about me!" Rachel yelled.

"You're hysterical and a control freak. But you're not scared." Randal said.

"Don't you tell me how I feel! You have no idea how I feel!" Rachel yelled.

"If you would just listen to me for a minute instead of screaming at me like you always do, I'll tell you why you don't have to be scared of him." Randal said.

The door behind Rachel swung ajar and a tall dark haired man entered the kitchen.

The handsome man rubbed at his mouth with a crumpled linen napkin. He glanced at Randal with an expression of trepidation across his features before he looked at Rachel.

"Josh, what are you doing in here? You're supposed to be in there enjoying the party." Rachel said.

"I just came to see if you. Well, if everything was okay." Josh said.

"Hey, Josh. I see you're really liking those hot wings. There's sauce all over your face." Randal said.

"Uh, yeah. Those wings are killer with just enough of a kick for you to call the fire department." Josh said.

"Ha. Ha." Randal chuckled.

"Josh, don't pay him any mind. What is it? Are the buffalo wings all gone?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah, cause I ate them all. No, just joking. But seriously, are you okay? Cause we kinda heard a crash. Is that wine all over the floor?" Josh asked.

"Everything is fine, Josh. I was just a little clumsy. Just go back inside and enjoy the party. I'll defrost some more wings for you." Rachel said.

"That'll be so great. Well, are you sure that you'll be okay? Cause I can help with the clean up." Josh asked.

"No, I wouldn't dream of asking a guest to help. Just go in and enjoy yourself. I promise we'll be there soon." Rachel said.

"Okay. Well, I uh. I just thought you should know that some of the guests are starting to leave." Josh said.

"No, they can't leave. I'll be right there. Just tell them to wait." Rachel said.

A loud clicking sound filled the room.

"What's that noise?" Josh asked.

Josh moved to the side of the door. He stared at something behind Rachel and he took a step back. His eyes became wide and he raised his hands to his face with a choking gasp.

"Josh?" Rachel asked.

Rachel saw something large and dark in the corner of her eye. She turned her head and she saw the small gray ghoul leap atop Josh's form.

The thing landed on Josh's chest and it let out a loud shriek as it ripped into his face with its teeth.

Josh stumbled backwards and he fell through the swinging door behind him. He stumbled into the living room and he landed on the floor atop his spine with a hollow thud.

He writhed atop the floor with screams of agony as the small creature tore into his flesh.

The gray beast lowered its head to Josh's neck and it dragged its teeth across the front of the young man's throat.

Rachel rushed into the living room and she screamed when she saw the gray creature gnaw at the front of Josh's throat.

"No! No!" Rachel screamed.

The animal raised its head from the young man's throat and it pulled a thick piece of skin from the twitching man's neck.

The creature held the skin between its teeth as it kneeled atop Josh's chest. It moved its head from side to side rapidly before it tossed back its head and swallowed the dripping flap of skin with a loud gulp.

Josh raised his hands into the air. He let out a loud choking noise as thick jets of dark fluid gushed from the ragged hole in the center of his neck.

The creature lowered its form to Josh's midsection and it raised its thin hands. The gray beast ripped at the shuddering man's clothing before it thrust its claw tipped hands in the flesh of the young man's abdomen.

The creature wriggled its hands within the interior of the young man's body cavity before it pulled at the young man's flesh.

A large gaping wound appeared in the center of the twitching man's midsection. The ghoul thrust its hands inside of the gore filled aperture and it pulled out several long strands of glistening intestines. The small beast shook the dripping entrails in the air with a chirping giggle before it threw the innards behind him.

The thick wet coils sailed into the air and the glistening entrails fell atop Rachel's face with a loud slap.

Rachel pulled at the chilled guts and she threw the slippery entrails onto the floor with a loud cry.

Randal rushed into the room. He stood behind his wife and he gasped when he saw the small gray creature gorging on Josh's internal organs.

Rachel turned around and she grabbed her husband's shoulders. She shook the blonde man's form violently as

she screamed at him.

"Stop that thing! Stop it!" Rachel cried.

"Alright." Randal said.

Randal pushed Rachel away from him and he moved towards Josh's body. He reached into the rear of his trousers and he pulled out a small handgun. He raised the firearm in his hand and he aimed it at the feasting creature.

"I'm sorry buddy." Randal said.

The ghoul raised its head from Josh's form and it turned its body in Randal's direction.

The creature stared at Josh and it opened its flesh filled mouth and let out a low mewling sound.

"Shoot it!" Rachel shrieked.

Randal moved forward. He turned from the chewing creature and he looked at Josh's face.

Josh lay motionless beneath the feasting ghoul and he stared up at the ceiling with glassy blue eyes.

"What are you waiting for, you coward! Shoot the damned thing! Shoot it!" Rachel screamed.

The creature let out a loud shriek before it leaped into the air.

Randal stared at the twitching beast and he blinked when he saw a blood covered hand clasped around its neck.

Randal looked at the floor and he cried out when he saw Josh seated upright atop the floor.

Josh held the screaming ghoul's throat in his hand. The sound of a loud crack filled the room before he threw the wailing animal across the room.

Josh turned to Randal and he licked his lips before he leaped to his feet. He stared at the blonde man with an expression of hunger across his features and he let out a high pitched squeal just before he rushed towards him.

Randal stared at Josh's glowing red eyes before he fired the weapon in his hands.

Josh's head exploded in a burst of black fluid and brittle bones.

Josh stumbled backwards and the soles of his shoes slipped in the puddle of dark muck atop the floor with loud squeaking sounds. His slender hands reached up and the twitching limbs grabbed at the empty space atop his shoulders where his head had once been. His arms fell limply at his sides just before his headless form collapsed atop the hardwood floor.

The ghoul fled from a darkened corner of the room and it let out a loud screech as it ran across the floor.

The small gray animal stopped in front of Randal and it grabbed the young man's legs with a shuddering cry.

Randal lowered the gun in his hand and he patted at the trembling creature's head.

"It's okay, boy. It's okay." Randal said softly.

Rachel moved forward and she stopped in front of Josh's headless corpse.

She stared at the large hole in the middle of the motionless man's belly. She gagged when she saw a torrent of writhing maggots and crawling beetles swarming within a layer of frothy green slime that glistened among his blackened organs.

Rachel heard a loud dripping sound. She turned from the headless corpse and she stared up at the room around her.

She grabbed at her heart with a gasp when she saw dozens of twisted body parts resting atop the blood covered floor.

Wide splashes of blood lay atop the ceiling and dozens of crimson handprints covered the walls of the large room. Bits of brains oozed atop the curtains and long coils of intestines were draped atop the furniture.

A severed arm hung limply from the center of the cracked television screen. A row of severed heads rested atop the marble fireplace and half of a screaming face was attached to the center of the front door.

Rachel stared at the large piece of flesh as it slid slowly down the center of the wooden door and she jumped in fright when the thin flap of skin fell from the closed wooden portal and landed atop the blood covered floor with a loud plop.

"What, what happened?" Rachel asked with a sob.

"Like I was trying to tell you in the kitchen. You don't have anything to worry about with him. Ghouls only feed on the dead." Randal said.



WHY I'M IN BALTIMORE

by Noah Elliot Blake

THE FIRST TIME I killed a man I was 8. He cried incessantly while I kicked at the back of his head with my brothers doing the same. My father watched as the man said, "Not me, god not me," over and over, trying to stress, I suppose, that we were confused about who we were killing. We weren't. We killed to watch the gore and test the limits of our breaking world. Who wasn't something we were interested in. We were scorpions scuttling in the sand, benthic kraken pups, empty, empty.

Things change. Two years ago I counted four of my brothers dead, one by his own will (and a stretch of rope tied to a burnt black street sign) and one from diphtheria. The other two gone in the night, which is dead enough by our account, and dead again by anyone else's. Two others joined the army when it was still taking, when it was still around. My father wandered into West Virginia sometime after that, climbing a hill and waving his .38 at us, threatening to bleed, to maim. We knew not to follow. The youngest three looked at me, their eyes turgid with an astonished desolation I was not too gone to grieve for later, alone. They were twelve, eleven, and nine. I was twelve too. We continued alone.

We don't make it long. We crack up, we bare skin to the rain, hallucinating, we eat from cans of paint and laugh at our nude bodies. The nine year old lives the longest but dies too. Starvation I think. Exhaustion I think. I survive skeletal, a thing of gloom living under rocks and rubble, drinking gasoline, making dinner of crickets that have learned not to sing.

A woman sleeps under a dying tree and I find her. She tells me about a boat leaving from the East because I make her. I feel punctured as I strangle her in the dusk; a lambent ceremony I am not more wretched for.

It was nice once, I say.

Yes, she nods.

The gratitude in her expression is replaced by the gravel hue of death. I don't eat her. I begin walking to Baltimore.

No one is here. The water is crowded with garbage and decaying fish while the great boats line up half-submerged in the harbor, rusting and moaning in the waves and wind. I consider what may lie underneath the sur-

face; know it to be terrible, know that knowing so is the same as knowing nothing. I think about jumping in but don't. My legs are reeds, my head mash.

She might have meant New York and I'm not dead through. Yet. Now a grey seagull comes in from the grey sky and rests on the pier, its curiosity emaciated like mine. It won't look at me so I throw a piece of glass at it that skips across the rotten wood and right by its calloused legs. It doesn't move and I move on.

When it comes I barely even notice it: a flicker of light then a deep thud in my stomach then a pop barking in a pack of echoes. Then quiet, then unconsciousness. I come to sitting against stone steps but I don't try to stand up. There's no chance of it. I hope to pass into a coma before he comes for me. Wouldn't want to hear his voice. No luck.

He comes over a blasted brick wall with a rifle over his shoulder, a crooked black hat obscuring his face but for his tongue, which licks his dried lips languorously.

"Thought you looked young," he says.

The day is spent. The tattered sun moves on to torture the other side of the earth. The wicked moon replaces it, the clouds lashed and lashed.

"What will remember this?" I say.

"First no one, then the dust. But not long after that, nothing," he says.

I follow his crumbling words into the harbor dark, out to the coast, beyond the spans of flora rotting in the water, and up, where they are lost over the pitiless sky, the place that I, reciprocating, proceed to remember nothing.



LULLABY

by Jamie Eyberg

JIM STOOD IN FRONT of the bathroom mirror. His eyes had dark circles puddled underneath, and his eyelids drooped. The yellow in his eyes where they should be white was giving way to red. Even the growth of beard on his face looked tired on his face.

"Just go lie down," he told himself. "Lie down, close your eyes and go to sleep." The words escaped his mouth and shot back at him from the mirror.

The baby in the next apartment screamed louder. The sound did not bother him. The baby had been screaming, it seemed, ever since it had been born. He had been able to sleep through that, it was just background noise anymore, like a radio that never shut down.

No. This was in his head. The thoughts that ran through his head and kept him awake. They pounded on the sides of his skull and forced him to pour out the thoughts on whatever he could. Stretched canvas littered the apartment. Dripped paint blotched on the floor until the carpet looked like another piece of art. Even the journals that he kept by his bed and on the kitchen table, stacked on one another until they toppled to the floor. Each of their 70 pages of college ruled paper filled with black ink, in a scrawl that had become all but unreadable.

And still the thoughts came. Thoughts of far off places that he had never been. Thoughts of distant animals that might not exist. Thoughts of mortality and existence, they all came flooding out onto whatever he could find. Not even the deafening drone of the little girl, whose colic never seemed to go away could keep him from his thoughts.

For eleven weeks now he had lain awake. The empty pens by the table and the canvas that could not possibly hold another layer of paint his only respite.

He thought he would welcome company. Perhaps someone to talk with, or as was usually the case, talk too. He had tried, leaving the apartment, if only for a moment, trying to catch a conversation with a passerby or the woman in the coffee shop, but he got flustered and his tongue tied itself in knots so he went home more frustrated and alone.

One Sunday morning there was a knock on the door. Jim answered, paint running down his robe as he tried

to flatten his hair with the palm of his hand. It was the woman next door, Jim had seen her around, usually the little girl in her arms screaming uncontrollably as she grasped the child and an armload of shopping bags down the hallway.

The child was still in the apartment, screaming the wail that he had become accustomed to. The woman held a paper plate of cookies.

"What are these for," he asked and took the plate. Steam rose from them and he could just catch the scent of brown sugar and chocolate.

"I just want to apologize for keeping you up. Melinda has the colic and I can't get her to settle down."

"Oh, don't worry about her. She hasn't been a bother. I hope she gets over it," Jim said before he closed the door and went back to his painting, sloshing a happy red on the floor as he ran the brush up the already mottled canvas.

That was four days before and now he stood before the mirror. Nothing had changed. His mind still set on overdrive, not wanting to give up what his body so desperately needed.

He thought back to the last time he had experienced something similar. A bout of insomnia that had lasted two weeks. It ate away his free time and ruined relationships as his temper became short and his days ran into each other.

"Why don't you just close your eyes," his girlfriend at the time had stated to him.

"It's not like I'm wanting to stay awake," he said bluntly before she walked out the door, never to return. He had tried everything to keep his eyes closed. Alcohol only made him angrier and the sleeping pills made him jittery, which the doctor couldn't account for. He had spent most of his time beating out his thoughts on an old manual typewriter, even replacing the ribbon once and running through reams of paper until his mind became peaceful and he had nothing new to say.

He fell asleep on the chair and awoke three days later on the floor. His roommate not daring to disturb him.

That was different. This was much longer. It was more urgent. The thoughts more erratic and his aging body

threatened revolt with every breath.

But the mind refused to give in to the bodies demands he noted in his journals. Not even counting stars seemed to help. Eight-thousand forty-seven stars were visible out of the picture window from his bed. The number was slightly less, he discovered if you moved your head to the foot of the bed. Seven-thousand six-hundred three. That was just visible ones. He was sure that he could count more if the lights from the parking lot were dimmer.

He walked to the table and sat down. Cockroaches scattered from the tops of the cookies, the steam long since dissipated with the smells of brown sugar and chocolate. Melinda screamed at a pitch he had not heard her hit yet. He lay his head down on the table and fell asleep. His thoughts poured from the gunshot wound in his head.

Next door, a young mother could only hear the screams of her child as she held her close.



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Dinner

by Aaron A. Polson

AT 4:52 PM, A DELIVERY MAN, rushed and late on his route, drops a brown package on the stoop of 721 Haven Avenue. The package is clearly labeled in large, block letters: Dr. Kiekhoffer, 723 Haven. Something tinkled inside the box as it landed.

By 5:00, a small line of hungry, red dots trail from the box.

Fifteen minutes later, Kathy stumbles into the kitchen at 721 Haven carrying a heavy brown sack of groceries in one arm and her car keys in the opposite hand. She kicks the door shut with one foot and drops the groceries on the counter. Glancing at her wall clock, she takes note of the time: 5:15 PM. A small, scurrying red thing pulls at the corner of her vision.

"Ew, an ant," she mutters, pressing a thumb into the offending insect, leaving a small red smear behind. Kathy yanks a paper towel from the holder, quickly wipes up the mark, and rinses the blood-like stain from her thumb under the running faucet.

She looks back at the clock. 5:18. Steve will be home by six. Kathy reaches into the brown bag and fishes out an onion, a green pepper, and some broccoli. Stir fry. That will be quickest. Just as she slides the chopping board from its nest next to the stove, she spots two more red, scavenging ants meandering on the backsplash above the sink. Grabbing another paper towel, she wads it into a ball and smashes both with a quick blotting motion.

She begins chopping the vegetables. More red dots bleed in from the periphery, and Kathy looks up for a moment—just long enough for the sharp knife point to slice the tip of her thumb.

"Shit!" The knife clatters to the floor. Wrapping the other hand around her thumb, Kathy rushes out of the kitchen, down the hall, and into the bathroom. She rinses the wound, rummages for a bandage, and applies it over the groove carved her skin.

Returning to the kitchen, she finds a score of ants milling around a drop blood in the sink. Kathy yanks the sprayer from its home next to the faucet. Little red legs kick and struggle, but ultimately wash into gaping drain. Tucking a loose strand of brown hair behind her ear, Kathy slides the sprayer back into place.

At 5:29, she glances at the clock again, reaches under the stove, and grabs a large skillet. The burner flashes with a flick of her wrist, and she turns to her cutting board and chopped vegetables. Something tickles her neck as she pours a little peanut oil into the hot skillet.

"Damn!" She brushes one hand across her throat. An ant drops into the warm oil and sizzles, writhing and squirming. "Oh..."

Her neck begins to throb. Then the burning sensation, like hundreds of small pins scratching her skin, erupts under her blouse, around her waist band, and down her legs. Kathy digs her fingers into her flesh and scratches. The red swarm covers her exposed forearms, little ants stinging and pinching her pink flesh, and these ants draw blood. Minute dots of viscous red swelled on her skin.

Her head swings around the room. Even the walls seem to crawl with zig-zagging little blots of red.

Kathy squeezes her eyes against the burning pain and stumbles into the hallway with her hands held in front as guides. "The shower," she mumbles, staggering toward the bathroom. They continue stinging relentlessly. Tears push from her eyes, and Kathy drops hard to her knees, reaching for the wall with one hand, painting a blotch of blood and crushed insect in a great arc as she falls.

On hands and knees, she gropes toward the bathroom and promised salvation of the shower. She pulls at the hallway rug and squeezes out a little gasp as her water-logged lenses focus on a moving, red mass, thousands strong. The ants continue to wash toward her.

The clock on the kitchen wall reads 5:45. The door rattles and clicks open. Kathy's husband Steve, a burly man in a dark suit, steps through the door, glances at the stove, and notes the empty skillet. "Honey? What's for dinner?"





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